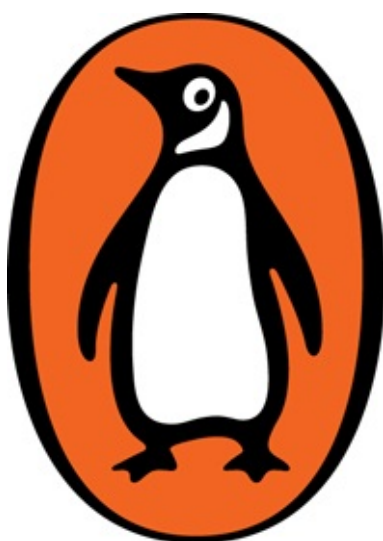


GEORGES SIMENON

The Cellars of the Majestic

INSPECTOR MAIGRET





Georges Simenon

THE CELLARS OF THE MAJESTIC

Translated by Howard Curtis



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Georges Simenon was born on 12 February 1903 in Liège, Belgium, and died in 1989 in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he had lived for the latter part of his life.

Simenon always resisted identifying himself with his famous literary character, but acknowledged that they shared an important characteristic:

My motto, to the extent that I have one, has been noted often enough, and I've always conformed to it. It's the one I've given to old Maigret, who resembles me in certain points ... 'understand and judge not'.

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1. Prosper Donge's Tyre

A car door slamming. That was always the first noise of the day. The engine still running outside. Charlotte was presumably shaking the driver's hand. Then the taxi drove away. Footsteps. The key in the lock and the click of a light switch.

A match was struck in the kitchen, and the gas stove made a *phffft* sound as it came on.

Slowly, like someone who has spent all night standing up, Charlotte climbed the overly new staircase. She came noiselessly into the bedroom. Another light switch. A bulb came on, with a pink handkerchief over it as a lampshade and wooden tassels at the four corners of the handkerchief.

Prosper Donge had not opened his eyes. Charlotte looked at herself in the wardrobe mirror as she undressed. When she got down to her girdle and brassiere, she sighed. She was as fat and pink as a Rubens, but she was obsessive about squeezing herself in. Once naked, she rubbed the flesh where there were marks.

She had an unpleasant way of getting into bed, kneeling on it first, which made the base tilt to one side.

'Your turn, Prosper!'

He got up. She quickly huddled into the warm hollow he had left behind, pulled the blankets up to her eyes and stopped moving.

'Is it raining?' he asked as he flushed the toilet.

A vague grunt. It didn't matter. The water for shaving was ice cold. Trains could be heard passing.

Prosper Donge got dressed. From time to time, Charlotte sighed, because she couldn't get to sleep while the light was on. He had one hand already on the doorknob and was stretching his right arm towards the light switch when he heard a thick voice:

‘Don't forget to go and pay the instalment for the wireless.’

On the kitchen stove, the coffee was hot, too hot. He drank it standing up. Then, like all those who make the same gestures at the same time every day, he wrapped a knitted scarf around his neck and put on his coat and cap.

Finally, he took his bicycle, which was in the passage, and pushed it outside.

Invariably, at that hour, he was greeted by a breath of cold, damp air, and there was wetness on the cobbles, even though it hadn't rained; the people asleep behind the closed shutters would probably know only a warm, sunny day.

The street, lined with detached houses and little gardens, sloped steeply downwards. Sometimes, between two trees, the lights of Paris could be glimpsed, as if at the bottom of a chasm.

It was no longer night, but it wasn't yet day. The air was mauve. The lights were coming on in a few windows, and Prosper Donge braked before he got to the level crossing, which was closed. He had to get across through the gates.

After the Pont de Saint-Cloud, he turned left. A tugboat followed by its string of barges was whistling furiously, asking for the lock gate to be opened.

The Bois de Boulogne ... The lakes reflecting a paler sky, with swans waking up ...

Just as he reached Porte Dauphine, the ground suddenly felt harder beneath Donge's wheels. He went a few more metres, then got off and had a look. His rear tyre was flat.

He looked at his watch. It was ten to six. He began walking quickly, pushing his bicycle, and there was a slight mist in front of his lips, while the heat of the effort burned his chest inside.

Avenue Foch ... Closed shutters in all the mansions ... A high-ranking officer, followed only by his orderly, was trotting along the bridle path ...

Light behind the Arc de Triomphe ... He was hurrying now ... He felt really hot ...

Just at the corner of the Champs-Élysées, a policeman in a cape, standing near the news stand, cried out:

‘Flat tyre?’

He nodded. Three hundred metres to go. The Hotel Majestic, on the left, with all its shutters closed. The streetlamps were no longer giving out much light.

He turned into Rue de Berri, then Rue de Ponthieu. A little bar was open. Two buildings further on, a door that passers-by never noticed, the service entrance of the Majestic.

A man was just coming out. A suit could be glimpsed under his grey coat. He was bare-headed. He had slicked-back hair, and Prosper Donge assumed it was the dancer, Zebio.

He could have glanced into the bar to make sure, but the thought never occurred to him. Still pushing his bicycle, he entered a long grey passage lit by a single light. He stopped by the clocking-on machine, turned the wheel, inserted the card into his number, 67, and as he did so glanced at the little clock on the machine, which showed ten past six. A click.

It was now an established fact that he had entered the Majestic at ten past six in the morning, ten minutes later than usual.

Such, at least, was the official statement of Prosper Donge, the head coffee maker for the luxury hotel on the Champs-Élysées.

As for what happened next, he claimed that he had continued to act as he did every morning.

At that hour, the vast basement areas with their complicated corridors, their multiple doors, their walls painted grey like the gangways of a freighter, were deserted. Through the glass partitions, all you could see, here and there, were the dim bulbs with their yellowish filaments which constituted the night lighting.

Everything had glass partitions, the kitchens on the left, then the bakery. Opposite, the room known as the couriers’ room, where the higher-ranking staff ate, along with the guests’ private domestics, their chambermaids and chauffeurs.

A bit further along, the dining room for the lower-grade staff, with its long white wooden tables and its benches like the kind you find in schools.

Finally, dominating the basement like the bridge of a ship, a smaller glass cage, where the bookkeeper sat, the man whose job it was to check everything that came out of the kitchens.

As he opened the door to the coffee room, Prosper Donge had the impression that someone was climbing the narrow staircase that led to the upper floors, but paid no attention. That at least was what appeared subsequently in his statement.

Just as Charlotte had done on entering their suburban house, he now struck a match, and the gas made a *phffft* sound under the smallest of the percolators, the one that came on first for the few guests who got up early.

Only once he had done that did he go into the locker room. This was quite a large room along one of the corridors. There were several wash-basins, a greyish mirror and, along the walls, tall, narrow metal lockers, each bearing a number.

With his key, he opened locker 67. He took off his coat, scarf and hat. He changed shoes: for his day's work he preferred elastic-sided shoes, which were softer. He put on a white jacket.

A few more minutes ... At half past six, the basement areas started coming to life ...

Up above, everything was asleep, apart from the night porter, who was waiting in the deserted lobby to be relieved.

The percolator hissed. Donge filled a cup with coffee and set off up the staircase, which was like one of those mysterious staircases you find backstage in theatres that lead to the most unexpected places.

When he opened a narrow door, he found himself in the lobby cloakroom. Nobody would have guessed the door was there, covered as it was with a large mirror.

'Coffee!' he announced, placing the cup on the cloakroom counter. 'How's it going?'

'Fine!' the night porter grunted as he approached.

Donge went back downstairs. His three women, the Three Fat Ladies as they were known, had arrived. They were lower-class women, all three ugly, one of them old and bad-tempered. They were already washing cups and saucers in the sink, making a great clatter.

As for Donge, he did what he did every day, arranged the silver coffee pots in order of size: one cup, two cups, three cups ... Then the little milk jugs ... the teapots ...

In the bookkeeper's glass cage, he glimpsed Jean Ramuel, his hair dishevelled.

‘He must have slept here again!’ he observed.

For three or four nights now, the bookkeeper, Ramuel, had been sleeping at the hotel rather than going home, which was somewhere in Montparnasse.

As a rule, that was forbidden. At the very end of the corridor, near the door concealing the stairs to the lower basement, where the wines were kept, there was indeed a room with three or four beds. But theoretically they were reserved for those members of staff who needed a breather between busy periods.

Donge waved a brief hello to Ramuel, who responded with a similarly vague gesture.

Next, it was the turn of the head chef, huge and self-important, who had just returned from Les Halles with a lorry that parked in Rue de Ponthieu to be unloaded by his assistants.

By half past seven, at least thirty people were bustling about in the basements of the Majestic. Bells started ringing, the dumb waiters came down, stopped and went back up with trays, while Ramuel stuck white, blue and pink slips on the iron spikes lined up on his desk.

At that hour, the day porter, in his light-blue uniform, was just taking over the lobby and the mail clerk was sorting through the mail in his box room. It must be sunny in the Champs-Élysées but, in the basement, the only thing you were aware of was the rumbling of the buses making the glass partitions vibrate.

A few minutes after nine – at exactly 9.04, as they were able to establish – Prosper Donge left the coffee room and a few seconds later entered the locker room.

‘I’d left my handkerchief in my coat!’ he stated when he was questioned.

Be that as it may, he now found himself alone in the room with its hundred metal lockers. Did he open his own? Nobody was there to witness it. Did he get his handkerchief? It was possible.

There weren’t a hundred, but exactly ninety-two lockers, all numbered. The last five were empty.

Why did it occur to Prosper Donge to open locker 89, which, not belonging to anyone, wasn’t locked?

‘I did it without thinking ...’ he asserted. ‘The door was ajar ... I never imagined ...’

What was in this locker was a body which must have been pushed into it in an upright position and had collapsed in on itself. It was the body of a woman of about thirty, very blonde – artificially blonde, in fact – wearing a thin black woollen dress.

Donge did not cry out. Looking quite pale, he approached Ramuel's glass cage and bent down to speak through the opening.

'Come and have a look ...'

The bookkeeper followed him.

'Stay here ... Don't let anyone get too close ...'

Ramuel rushed upstairs, emerged in the lobby cloakroom and spotted the porter in conversation with a chauffeur.

'Has the manager arrived?'

The porter gestured with his chin towards the manager's office.

Standing by the revolving door, Maigret was on the point of knocking his pipe against his heel to empty it. Then he shrugged and put it back between his teeth. It was his first pipe of the morning, the best one.

'The manager's expecting you, sir ...'

The lobby was not very busy yet. There was only an Englishman arguing with the mail clerk, and a young girl walking on her long grasshopper legs, carrying a hatbox, which she was presumably delivering.

Maigret walked into the manager's office. The manager shook his hand without a word and indicated an armchair. A green curtain concealed the glass door, but you just had to pull it slightly to see everything that was happening in the lobby.

'Cigar?'

'No, thanks ...'

They had known each other for a long time. They didn't need many words. The manager was wearing striped trousers, a dark jacket with edging and a tie that seemed to have been cut out of some stiff material.

'Here ...'

He pushed a registration form across the table.

Oswald J. Clark, industrialist, of Detroit, Michigan (USA). Coming from Detroit.
Arrived 12 February.

Accompanied by: Mrs Clark, his wife; Teddy Clark, 7, his son; Ellen Darroman, 24, governess; Gertrud Borms, 42, maid.
Suite 203.

Phone calls. The manager answered impatiently. Maigret folded the form in four and slipped it into his wallet.

‘Which one is it?’

‘Mrs Clark ...’

‘Ah!’

‘The hotel doctor, whom I telephoned immediately after alerting the Police Judiciaire, and who lives nearby, in Rue de Berri, is downstairs. He says Mrs Clark was strangled between six and six thirty in the morning.’

The manager was glum. Pointless telling a man like Maigret that it was a disaster for the hotel and that if there was any way of hushing the whole thing up ...

‘So the Clark family have been here for a week ...’ Maigret said. ‘What kind of people are they?’

‘Oh, perfectly respectable ... He’s a tall, strong-looking American, a cool character, about forty ... Perhaps forty-five ... His wife – poor thing – must have been French originally ... Twenty-eight or twenty-nine ... I didn’t see much of her ... The governess is pretty ... The maid, who works as the child’s nurse, fairly ordinary, rather forbidding ... Oh, by the way, I almost forgot ... Clark left for Rome yesterday morning ...’

‘By himself?’

‘From what I gathered, he’s in Europe on business ... He owns a factory that makes ball bearings ... He has to visit the major capitals, and in the meantime decided to leave his wife, son and staff in Paris ...’

‘What train?’ Maigret asked.

The manager picked up the telephone. ‘Hello! Porter? ... What train did Mr Clark take yesterday? ... That’s right, 203 ... Did you send any luggage on to the station? ... He only took a travelling bag? ... A taxi? ... Désiré’s taxi? ... Thanks ...’

‘Did you hear that, inspector? He left at eleven yesterday morning by taxi, Désiré’s taxi, which is almost always parked in front of the hotel. He only had a travelling bag with him ...’

‘Do you mind if I also make a phone call? ... Hello! Police Judiciaire, please, mademoiselle ... Police Judiciare? ... Lucas? ... Go straight to Gare de Lyon ... Find out about trains to Rome since eleven o’clock yesterday morning ...’

As he continued to give instructions, his pipe went out.

‘Tell Torrence to find Désiré’s taxi ... Yes ... Usually parked outside the Majestic ... Find out where he took a passenger, a tall, slim American he picked up yesterday from the hotel ... OK ...’

He looked for an ashtray to empty his pipe. The manager handed him one.

‘Are you sure you don’t want a cigar? ... The nurse is beside herself ... I thought it best to inform her ... As for the governess, she didn’t sleep at the hotel last night ...’

‘What floor is the suite?’

‘Second floor ... With a view of the Champs-Élysées ... Mr Clark’s room, separated by a sitting room from his wife’s room ... Then the child’s room, the nurse’s and finally the governess’s ... They asked to be put together ...’

‘Is the night porter still here?’

‘No, but I know, from needing him once, that he can be contacted by phone ... His wife is the concierge of a new apartment block in Neuilly ... Hello! ... Get me ...’

Within five minutes, they had learned that Mrs Clark had gone to the theatre by herself the previous evening and had got back a few minutes after midnight. The nurse hadn’t gone out. As for the governess, she hadn’t dined at the hotel and hadn’t been back all night.

‘Shall we go downstairs and have a look?’ Maigret sighed.

There were more people in the lobby by now, but none of them suspected the drama that had taken place while everyone was asleep.

‘We’ll go this way ... Would you please follow me, inspector? ...’

As he said this, the manager frowned. The revolving door was moving. A young woman in a grey tailored suit came in at the same time as a ray of sunlight. Passing the mail clerk, she asked in English:

‘Anything for me?’

‘That’s her, inspector, Miss Ellen Darroman ...’

Fine, well-fitting silk stockings. The prim and proper look of someone who has taken great care over her grooming. No trace of fatigue on her face but, on

the contrary, a pink glow caused by the brisk air of a fine February morning.

‘Do you want to talk to her?’

‘Not just yet ... One moment ...’

Maigret walked over to an inspector he had brought with him, who was standing in a corner of the lobby.

‘Don’t let that young woman out of your sight ... If she goes into her suite, stand outside the door ...’

The cloakroom. The big mirror swung open on its hinges. Maigret and the manager found themselves on the narrow staircase. All at once, there was no more gilt, no more pot plants, no more elegant bustle. A kitchen smell rose from below.

‘Does this staircase serve all the floors?’

‘There are two like this ... They go from the lower basement to the attics ... But you have to know the place well to use them ... On each floor, for example, there’s just a little door like all the others, without a number, and it would never occur to any of the guests ...’

It was nearly eleven. Now there were no longer just fifty, but more like a hundred and fifty people swarming about the basement, some in white chefs’ hats, the others in waiters’ uniforms or cellarmen’s aprons, and the women, like Prosper Donge’s Three Fat Ladies, doing the heavy work ...

‘This way ... Make sure you don’t slip or dirty your clothes ... The corridors are narrow ...’

Through the glass partitions, everybody was watching the manager and above all the inspector. Jean Ramuel continued grabbing the slips he was being passed, almost in mid-air, and checking the contents of the trays at a glance.

The jarring element was the unexpected figure of a policeman standing guard outside the locker room. The doctor, who was very young, had been informed of Maigret’s arrival and was smoking a cigarette as he waited.

‘Close the door ...’

The body was there, on the floor, surrounded by all the metal lockers. The doctor, still smoking, murmured:

‘She must have been grabbed from behind ... She didn’t struggle for long ...’

‘And the body wasn’t dragged along the floor!’ Maigret added, examining the dead woman’s dark clothes. ‘There’s no trace of dust ... Either she was killed

here, or she was carried here, most likely by two people, because it'd be difficult in this maze of narrow corridors ...'

In the locker where she had been discovered, there was a crocodile-skin handbag. Maigret opened it and took out an automatic revolver, which he slipped into his pocket after checking the safety catch. Nothing else in the bag apart from a handkerchief, a compact and a few banknotes that amounted to no more than a thousand francs.

Behind them, the hive was buzzing. The dumb waiters kept going up and down, bells rang endlessly, and, behind the glass partition of the kitchens, you could see heavy copper saucepans being handled and dozens of chickens being put on the spit.

'Everything has to be left where it is until the examining magistrate gets here,' Maigret said. 'Who was it who found ...?'

He was pointed in the direction of Prosper Donge, who was cleaning one of the percolators. He was a tall man with red hair, the kind of red hair that is called carrot-coloured. He might have been about forty-five or forty-eight. He had blue eyes and a pockmarked face.

'Have you employed him for long?'

'Five years ... Before that, he was at the Miramar in Cannes ...'

'Reliable?'

'As reliable as could be ...'

A glass partition separated Donge and Maigret. Through the glass, their eyes met, and the blood rushed to Donge's cheeks: like all redheads, he had delicate skin.

'Excuse me, sir ... Detective Chief Inspector Maigret is wanted on the telephone ...'

It was Jean Ramuel, the bookkeeper, who had just emerged from his cage.

'If you'd like to take the call here.'

A message from the Police Judiciaire. Since eleven o'clock the previous day, there had been only two express trains for Rome. Oswald J. Clark had caught neither. As for the driver, Désiré, who had been reached by phone in a bistro where he was a regular, he stated that he had driven his previous day's fare to the Hotel Aiglon on Boulevard Montparnasse.

Voices on the staircase, including a young woman shrilly protesting in English to a valet who was trying to bar her way.

It was the governess, Ellen Darroman, who was charging straight at them.



2. Maigret Goes Cycling

His pipe between his teeth, his hands in the pockets of his huge overcoat with its legendary velvet collar, his bowler hat pushed back a little on his head, Maigret watched as she shouted vehemently at the manager.

You just had to observe the inspector to sense that it wasn't going to be easy to establish a rapport between him and Ellen Darroman.

'What's she saying?' he sighed, interrupting her, unable to understand a word.

'She's asking if it's true that Mrs Clark has been murdered, and if anyone has phoned Rome to inform Oswald J. Clark; she wants to know where the body has been taken and if ...'

But the girl didn't let him finish. She had listened impatiently, with knitted brows, then given Maigret a withering glance, and now was starting up again, even angrier than before.

'What's she saying?'

'She wants me to take her to see the body and ...'

Maigret gently took hold of the girl's arm in order to show her to the locker room, even though he knew she would jump when he touched her. Just the kind of woman who exasperated him in American films! With something alarming about the dreadfully precise way she moved! Through the glass partitions, all the basement staff were staring at her.

'Please come in,' Maigret said with a touch of irony.

She took three steps, looked down at the form that lay covered with a blanket on the floor, stood quite still for a moment, then spoke again in her language.

'What's she saying?'

‘She’s asking for the body to be uncovered ...’

Maigret did so, without taking his eyes off her. He saw her give a shudder, then immediately regain her composure in spite of the genuine horror of the spectacle.

‘Ask her if she recognizes Mrs Clark ...’

A shrug of the shoulders. A particularly unpleasant way of striking the floor with her high heels.

‘What’s she saying?’

‘That you know as well as she does ...’

‘In that case, please ask her to come up to your office and tell her I have a few questions to ask her.’

The manager translated. As he did so, Maigret covered the dead woman’s face.

‘What’s she saying?’

‘She says no.’

‘Really? Please inform her that I am the head of the Special Branch at the Police Judiciaire ...’

Ellen, who was looking him in the eyes, spoke without waiting for the translation of these words. And again Maigret muttered his constant:

‘What’s she saying?’

‘*What’s she saying?*’ she repeated, aping him, seized with an irritability that was hard to explain.

And, again, she said something in English, as if talking to herself.

‘Translate what she’s saying. Would you mind?’

‘She’s saying that ... that she knows perfectly well you’re with the police ... that ...’

‘Don’t be afraid!’

‘That one just has to see your hat on your head and your pipe in your mouth ... I’m sorry ... You asked me to translate ... She says she won’t come to my office and she won’t answer your questions ...’

‘Why not?’

‘I’ll ask her ...’

Ellen Darroman, who was lighting a cigarette, listened to the manager, shrugged her shoulders once again and said a few words.

‘She says she isn’t accountable to anybody and that she’ll only obey an official summons ...’

With that, the girl threw a last look at Maigret, turned on her heels and, walking just as determinedly as before, headed for the stairs.

The manager turned somewhat nervously to the inspector and was quite surprised to see that he was smiling.

The heat of the basement had forced him to take off his coat, but he hadn’t abandoned either his bowler hat or his pipe. He was strolling calmly along the corridors, hands behind his back, stopping every now and again in front of one of the glass partitions, rather as he would have stopped in front of a fish tank.

That was pretty much the impression made on him by that vast basement, where the lights were kept on all day long: an aquarium. In each glass cage, creatures moved about, mostly in large numbers. You saw them coming and going, bearing burdens, cooking pots or piles of plates, setting dumb waiters or goods lifts in motion, constantly picking up little implements that were actually telephones.

‘A savage brought from deepest Africa witnessing all this ...’

The examining magistrate had only been there for a few minutes and, as usual, had given Maigret free rein. Maigret had made two or three phone calls from the cage of the bookkeeper Jean Ramuel.

Ramuel’s nose was so crooked, you always had the feeling you were looking at his profile. In addition, he clearly suffered from a liver ailment. Sure enough, when he was brought his lunch on a tray, he began by taking a sachet of white powder from his waistcoat pocket and dissolving it in a glass of water.

The busiest time was between one and three; the pace so fast that you had the impression you were watching a film speeded up.

‘Sorry ... Excuse me ...’

People kept bumping into Maigret but, unperturbed, he continued his leisurely stroll, constantly stopping and starting, occasionally asking a question.

How many people had he spoken to? Twenty, at least. The head chef had explained the workings of the kitchens. Jean Ramuel had told him what the different coloured slips stood for.

He had, again through a glass partition, watched the higher-ranking staff have lunch. Gertrud Borms, the Clarks' nurse, had come downstairs. A strong, hard-faced woman.

'Does she speak French?'

'Not a word ...'

She had eaten copiously, chatting to a liveried chauffeur sitting opposite her.

And the most extraordinary thing, during all that time, was to see Prosper Donge in his coffee room. He looked literally like a large goldfish in a bowl. His hair was bright red, he had the almost brick-like complexion of some redheads, and his lips were as thick as those of a fish.

Like a fish too, from time to time he would come and stick his face right up against the glass partition and look out wide-eyed, doubtless flabbergasted that the inspector hadn't yet said a word to him.

Maigret had spoken to everyone. And yet he had barely seemed to notice Prosper Donge, even though Donge, being the person who had found the body, was the principal witness!

Donge ate at a little table in his coffee room, while his three women bustled around him. A bell rang constantly, announcing the dumb waiter, which would appear in an opening like that of a ticket office. Donge would grab the slip that was on it, replace it with a tray bearing the order, and then the dumb waiter would rise towards one floor or other of the hotel.

All these apparently complicated comings and goings were actually quite simple. The great dining room of the Majestic, where two or three hundred people must have been at table right now, was located directly above the kitchens, and that was where most of the dumb waiters rose to. Every time one of them came down, you heard a snatch of music.

Some guests, though, had their meals in their suites, and there was a waiter on each floor. There was also, on the same level as the basement, a grill room which, at about five in the afternoon, became a ballroom.

The men from the morgue had come to fetch the body, and two forensic specialists had worked on locker 89 for half an hour with strong lights and cameras, looking for fingerprints.

None of that seemed to interest Maigret. He would be informed of the results in due time, after all.

Anyone seeing him might have thought he was carrying out an amateur study of the workings of a luxury hotel. He walked up the narrow staircase and opened a first door, which he closed again immediately, because he found himself in the great dining room, noisy with clattering forks, music and conversations.

He climbed some more. A corridor, numbered doors stretching to infinity, an enormously long red carpet.

In other words, any guest could open that door and thus gain access to the basement. It was like the entrance on Rue de Ponthieu. Two doormen, a porter and a few bellboys guarded the revolving door on the Champs-Élysées, but any passer-by could get into the Majestic through the service entrance, and it was unlikely that anyone would have been disturbed by his presence.

It was the same with most theatres, heavily guarded on one side, but wide open on the side of the stage door.

From time to time, people entered the locker room in their work clothes. Soon afterwards, you saw them come back out, well dressed, with their hats on their heads.

There was a constant changeover of staff. The head chef went and took a nap in the room at the back, as he did every day between the lunch rush and the dinner rush.

Starting at four, the music struck up, loud and close this time, because it came from the ballroom. Prosper Donge, looking overcome, kept filling rows of tiny teapots and microscopic milk jugs, then coming to the glass partition and throwing an anxious glance from a distance at Maigret.

At five, his three women left and were replaced by two others. At six, he went and took a bundle of slips and a sheet of paper, which was probably a summary, to Jean Ramuel. Then he in turn went to the locker room, came out again in his city clothes and picked up his bicycle: he'd had one of the bellboys repair the tyre.

Outside, night had fallen. Rue de Ponthieu was swarming with people. Weaving his way between the taxis and the buses, Prosper Donge headed for the Champs-Élysées. Just before he reached the Étoile, he suddenly did an about-turn, rode back to Rue de Ponthieu and went into a shop selling wirelasses and related articles, where he paid three hundred and something francs at the till as his monthly instalment.

The Champs-Élysées again. Then, without transition, the stately calm of Avenue Foch, the few cars passing in silence, as if gliding by. He rode slowly, like a man who has a long way to go, a solid citizen taking the same route at the same time every day.

A voice near him, a little way behind:

‘Do you mind, Monsieur Donge, if I go part of the way with you?’

He braked so abruptly that he swerved and almost knocked into Maigret’s bicycle. For it was Maigret riding beside him, on a bicycle that was too small for him, which he had borrowed from one of the bellboys at the Majestic.

‘I don’t understand,’ Maigret went on, ‘why everybody who lives in the suburbs doesn’t do the journey by bicycle. It’s so much healthier and more pleasant than going by bus or tram!’

They had reached the Bois de Boulogne. Soon they saw the reflections of the electric streetlamps on the lake.

‘You were so busy all day, I didn’t want to disturb you while you were working ...’

And Maigret too was pedalling with the steadiness of a man who is used to it. From time to time, you could hear the soft clicking of the free wheel.

‘Do you know what Jean Ramuel did before he started working at the Majestic?’

‘He was an accountant for a bank ... The Atoum Bank in Rue Caumartin ...’

‘Hmm! ... The Atoum Bank ... That doesn’t sound too good ... Don’t you think he looks a little shady?’

‘He’s in very poor health ...’ Prosper Donge murmured.

‘Careful ... You’re going to mount the pavement ... There’s another question I’d like to ask you, if you don’t consider it indiscreet ... You’re in charge of the coffee room ... I’m just wondering how you came to choose a profession like that ... What I mean is ... I don’t have the impression it’s a vocation, that at a particular moment, when you’re fifteen or seventeen, you say to yourself: “I’m going to make the coffees in a big hotel ...”

‘Careful ... If you keep swerving like that, you’ll end up being knocked down by a passing car ... What’s that you say? ...’

Donge explained, in a glum voice, that he had been in care as a child, that until the age of fifteen he had lived on a farm on the outskirts of Vitry-le-

François. Then he had moved to the town and worked in a café, first as a messenger boy, then as a waiter.

‘After my military service, I wasn’t in good health and I wanted to live in the South ... I was a waiter in Marseilles and Cannes. Finally, at the Miramar, they said I didn’t have the right kind of look to serve the customers ... I looked unappealing, that was what the manager said ... I was put in the coffee room ... I stayed there for several years and then accepted the position at the Majestic ...’

They crossed the Pont de Saint-Cloud. After turning two or three corners along the little streets, they came to the bottom of quite a steep slope, and Prosper Donge got off his bicycle.

‘Are you going any further?’ he asked.

‘If you don’t mind. After spending a day in the basement of the hotel, I really understand why you want to live in the country ... Do you do any gardening?’

‘A little ...’

‘Flowers?’

‘Flowers and vegetables ...’

Now they were climbing the poorly paved, poorly lit street, pushing their bicycles, and their breaths became warmer, their sentences rarer.

‘Do you know what I discovered prowling around the basement and chatting to this person and that? That at least three people slept in the cellars of the hotel last night. First Jean Ramuel ... Apparently – this is quite amusing – apparently he lives with a woman who has a foul temper and periodically throws him out of his own home ... Three or four days ago it happened again, and now he’s sleeping at the Majestic ... Does the manager allow it?’

‘Strictly speaking, it’s forbidden, but they turn a blind eye ...’

‘The professional dancer also slept there ... Zebio, as they call him ... Strange young man, isn’t he? ... Looking at him, he couldn’t be more Argentinian ... On the pictures of him that are on display in the ballroom, he has the name Eusebio Fualdès ... Then, when you look at his papers, you see that, in spite of his bluish hair, he was born in Lille and his real name is Edgar Fagonet ... There was a dinner dance last night, in honour of a film star ... He stayed until half past three in the morning ... Apparently he’s so poor he prefers to sleep at the hotel rather than pay for a taxi ...’

Prosper Donge had stopped not far from a streetlamp and stood there, red-faced, with nervous eyes.

‘What are you doing?’ Maigret asked.

‘I’m here ... I ...’

Light filtered beneath the door of a millstone house.

‘Would you mind terribly much if I came in with you for a moment?’

Maigret could have sworn that the big, flabby man’s knees were shaking, that his throat was tight, that he was almost dizzy. At last he made an effort and stammered:

‘If you like ...’

He opened the door with his key, pushed his bicycle into the passage and announced mechanically, as he must have done every day:

‘I’m home!’

At the far end of the passage there was a glass door, leading to the kitchen, where the lights were on. Donge went in.

‘Let me introduce you ...’

Charlotte was sitting back on her chair, warming her feet on the stove and sewing a pink silk slip.

Startled, she took her feet off the stove and looked for her slippers under her chair.

‘Oh, you have someone with you ... I beg your pardon, monsieur ...’

On the table, a cup that must have contained coffee and a plate on which you could still see cake crumbs.

‘Come in ... Sit down ... Prosper doesn’t often bring somebody home with him ...’

It was hot. The wireless was on, a fine, brand new machine. Charlotte was in her dressing gown, with her stockings rolled down below her knees.

‘A detective chief inspector? What’s going on?’ she asked anxiously when Donge had introduced Maigret.

‘Nothing, madame ... I happened to be working at the Majestic today and I made your husband’s acquaintance ...’

At the word husband, she looked at Prosper, then laughed.

‘Did he tell you we were married?’

‘I assumed ...’

‘Oh, no! ... Please sit down ... We just live together ... I even think we’re more like pals than anything else ... Isn’t that right, Prosper? ... We’ve known each other for such a long time! ... Mind you, if I wanted him to marry me ... But, as I keep telling him, what difference would it make? ... Everyone I know is perfectly well aware that I used to be a dancer, then a hostess, on the Côte d’Azur ... And that, if I hadn’t started putting on weight, I wouldn’t be a lavatory attendant in a nightclub in Rue Fontaine ... By the way, Prosper, did you pay the instalment?’

‘All done ...’

On the radio, they announced a talk about farming, and as Charlotte switched it off she noticed that her dressing gown was open and closed it with a safety pin. On the stove, an ordinary-looking boiled beef and onion stew was simmering. Charlotte was hesitating about whether to go ahead and lay the table. As for Prosper Donge, he didn’t know what to do, or where to put himself.

‘We could go in the living room ...’ he suggested.

‘You’re forgetting there’s no fire ... You’ll both freeze! ... If you two need to talk, I can go upstairs and get dressed ... You see, inspector, the two of us play a kind of hide and seek ... When I get back, he leaves ... When he gets back, it’s almost time for me to go, and we just have a little while to have a bite to eat together ... Even our days off almost never coincide, so when he’s off, he has to cook his own lunch ... You will have a drink, won’t you? ... Will you serve him, Prosper? ... I’m going up ...’

Maigret quickly intervened:

‘Oh, no, madame ... Please stay ... I’ll be going soon ... The thing is, a crime was committed at the Majestic this morning ... I wanted to ask your ... your friend for some information, given that it happened in the basement, when he was almost alone down there.’

It took an effort to continue this cruel game, given that Donge’s face – actually, did he look more like a fish or a sheep? – given that Donge’s face was a picture of pain and anguish. He was trying to stay calm and was more or less succeeding. But at the cost of what inner turmoil?

Only Charlotte suspected nothing and was filling little gold-rimmed glasses with spirits.

‘Was it among the staff that it happened?’ she asked, surprised but not greatly disturbed.

‘In the basement, but not among the staff ... That’s the troubling thing about this case ... Try to imagine a guest, a wealthy woman, staying at the Majestic with her husband, her son, a nurse and a governess ... In a suite that costs more than a thousand francs a day ... At six in the morning, she’s strangled, not in her room, but in the basement locker room ... In all likelihood, that’s where the crime was committed ... What was the woman doing in the basement? ... Who could have lured her down there, and how? ... Especially at an hour when people of that kind are usually still fast asleep ...’

It wasn’t much: a frown, as if a thought had crossed Charlotte’s mind, a thought she immediately rejected. A brief glance at Prosper, who was warming his hands over the stove. They were very white hands, with square fingers, covered in red hairs.

Meanwhile, Maigret continued, pitilessly:

‘It won’t be easy to establish what this Mrs Clark was doing in the basement ...’

He held his breath, made an effort to keep still, apparently staring at the oilcloth covering the table. You could have heard a pin drop.

Maigret seemed to be trying to give Charlotte time to dispel her fright. Because she had frozen. Her lips had remained half open, but no sound came out. At last, a vague syllable emerged, which sounded like:

‘Oh! ...’

Too bad! It was his job! It was his duty!

‘I wonder if you knew her ...’

‘Me?’

‘Not as Mrs Clark, she’s only had that name for just over six years, but as Émilienne, or rather Mimi ... She was a hostess in Cannes, at the very time you ...’

Poor, fat Charlotte! What a bad actress she was! The way she looked up at the ceiling, as if searching in her memory! With those far too innocent eyes!

‘Émilienne? ... Mimi? ... No! I don’t think so ... Are you sure it was in Cannes?’

‘In a nightclub that in those days was called the Belle Étoile, just behind the Croisette ...’

‘That’s amazing ... I don’t remember anyone called Mimi ... What about you, Prosper? ...’

He very nearly choked. Why force him to speak when he had a throat as tight as if caught in a pair of pliers?

‘N ... no ...’

On the surface, nothing had changed. In the kitchen, there was still that nice smell of small houses where the walls have a kind of comforting fragrance, and also that familiar smell of meat simmering on a bed of browned onions. The red check oilcloth on the table. Cake crumbs. Like most women with a tendency to put on weight, Charlotte probably gorged on pastries when she was alone!

And the pink silk slip!

Now, all at once, a drama had descended upon them. Nothing you could put your finger on. Anyone coming in would have thought that the Donge household was receiving a friendly visit from a neighbour.

Except that nobody dared say a word. Poor Prosper, his skin riddled with holes like a sieve thanks to smallpox, had closed his periwinkle-coloured eyes and was swaying so much, standing there by the stove, that he looked as if he might suddenly collapse on the tiled floor.

Maigret stood up with a sigh.

‘So sorry to have disturbed you ... It’s time I ...’

‘I’ll open the door for you ...’ Charlotte said quickly. ‘It’s about time I got dressed anyway ... I have to be there at ten, and in the evening there’s only one bus an hour ... Sometimes I ...’

‘Goodnight, Donge ...’

‘Good ...’

He may have said the rest, but it was inaudible. Maigret found his bicycle outside. The door closed behind him. He very nearly looked through the keyhole, but someone was coming down the street and he had no desire to be caught doing that.

He slowed down as he descended the slope and stopped outside a bistro.

‘Could you keep this bicycle for me? I’ll send someone to pick it up tomorrow morning.’

He drank something, anything, and went to wait for a bus on the Pont de Saint-Cloud. For a good hour, Sergeant Lucas had been phoning everywhere, trying without success to get in touch with his boss.



3. Charlotte at the Pélican

‘Here you are at last, Monsieur Maigret!’

The inspector, standing in the doorway of his apartment on Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, couldn’t help smiling, not because his wife had called him Monsieur Maigret, which she often did when she was joking, but because the gust of warmth that hit him in the face reminded him ...

He was a long way from Saint-Cloud, and he lived in a very different sphere from that of the false Donge couple ... All the same, when he got back he found Madame Maigret sewing, not in the kitchen, but in the dining room, her feet not on a big stove but on a small cast-iron one. And he would have sworn that here too the remains of a few cakes were lying about.

A ceiling light above the round table. On the tablecloth, a big curved soup tureen, a carafe of wine, a carafe of water, napkins in their silver rings. The smell coming from the kitchen was just like that of the boiled beef in the other place

...

‘There have already been three phone calls ...’

‘From the House?’

That was what he and his colleagues called the Police Judiciaire.

He took off his coat with a contented sigh, and as he warmed his hands for a moment over the stove he remembered that Prosper Donge had done the same thing earlier. At last, he picked up the phone and dialled a number.

‘Is that you, boss?’ came the familiar voice of Lucas at the other end of the line. ‘Are you all right? ... Anything new? ... Well, I have a few little things to tell you and that’s why I stayed ... First, about the governess ...’

‘Janvier tailed her when she left the Majestic ... You know what Janvier says about her? ... He reckons that in her country, she couldn’t have been a governess but a gangster ...

‘Hello? ... Anyway, I’ll quickly run through what happened ... She left the hotel not long after you spoke to her ... Instead of taking the taxi the doorman had hailed for her, she jumped in a taxi that was cruising, and Janvier had to make a big effort not to lose her ...

‘On the Grands Boulevards, she ran down into the metro ... Then she pulled that trick of getting off through a different door ... Janvier wouldn’t let her give him the slip and managed to follow her to Gare de Lyon ... He was afraid she was going to get on a train, because he didn’t have enough money on him ...

‘On Platform 4, the Rome Express was about to leave ... There were still ten minutes to go ... Ellen Darroman looked in all the carriages ... As she was turning to leave, looking upset, a tall, very elegant man arrived, carrying a travelling bag ...’

‘Oswald J. Clark ...’ Maigret said, looking absently at his wife as he listened. ‘She wanted to inform him, obviously ...’

‘From what Janvier says, they seem to have met more like good friends than like a boss and his employee ... Have you seen Clark? ... He’s a tall, slim fellow, well-built, fresh-faced, like a baseball player ... They walked up and down the platform, as if Clark was still thinking of leaving in spite of everything ... When the train started moving, he hadn’t yet made up his mind and even made a move to jump on the step ...

‘Eventually, they left the station and hailed a taxi. A few minutes later, they were at the American embassy on Avenue Gabriel ...

‘Then they went to Avenue Friedland, to the office of an American lawyer, an attorney as they call them ...

‘The attorney phoned the examining magistrate, and three-quarters of an hour later the three of them arrived at the Palais de Justice and were immediately shown into the magistrate’s office ...

‘I have no idea what happened in there, but Judge Bonneau asked for you to phone him as soon as you got back ... It seems it’s very urgent ...

‘To finish with Janvier’s report, after our three characters left the Palais de Justice, they went to the morgue to formally identify the body ... Finally, they

went back to the Majestic, and there Clark had two whiskies at the bar with his attorney, while the girl went up to her suite ...

‘That’s all, boss ... Judge Bonneau seems to be in a hurry to talk to you on the phone ... What’s the time? ... Up until eight, he’s at home: Turbigo 25-62 ... Then he’s at some friends’ place for dinner, but he gave me the number ... Wait ... Galvani 47-53 ...

‘Do you need me any more, boss? ... Goodnight, then ... Torrence will be on duty tonight ...’

‘Can I serve the soup?’ Madame Maigret asked, sighing and giving her dress a shake to remove the bits of thread.

‘Get my dinner jacket ready first ...’

As it was after eight, he called Galvani 47-53. It was the number of a young deputy prosecutor. A maid replied, and he heard the sound of forks and loud, cheerful voices.

‘I’ll call monsieur ... Who shall I say? ... Detective Chief Inspector Négret? ...’

Through the open door of the bedroom, he caught a glimpse of the mirrored wardrobe and Madame Maigret taking out his dinner jacket.

‘Is that you, Detective Chief Inspector? ... Um ... er ... You don’t speak English, do you? ... Hello, are you still there? ... That’s what I thought ... What I wanted to say ... Um! ... It’s about this case, obviously ... I think it would be preferable if you didn’t deal ... I mean directly ... with Mr Clark and his staff ...’

A vague smile hovered over Maigret’s lips.

‘Mr Clark came to see me this afternoon with the governess ... He’s quite an important figure, with connections in high places ... Before his visit, I had a phone call from the American embassy, telling me everything I needed to know about him ... You do understand, don’t you? ... In the circumstances, we must avoid blunders ...

‘Mr Clark had his attorney with him and insisted on my recording his statement ...

‘Hello? Are you still there, inspector? ...’

‘Of course, your honour! I’m listening ...’

In the background, the noise of forks. The conversation had ceased. Doubtless the deputy prosecutor's guests were listening attentively to the magistrate's monologue.

'Let me quickly bring you up to date ... Tomorrow morning, my clerk will let you have the text of the statement ... Mr Clark was indeed due to go to Rome, then to other capitals on business ... For some time now, he's been engaged to Miss Ellen Darroman ...'

'I beg your pardon, your honour. You did say engaged? I thought Mr Clark was married ...'

'Oh, yes, of course! ... But he was planning to get a divorce soon ... His wife didn't know about it yet ... So we can say engaged ... He took advantage of that trip to Rome ...'

'To first spend one night in Paris in the company of Miss Darroman ...'

'Indeed, yes. But you're mistaken, inspector, to take that ironic tone. Clark made an excellent impression on me. They do things a little differently in his country. Over there, divorce ... Anyway, of his own free will, he gave me a complete rundown of his movements last night ... In your absence, I handed it over to Inspector Ducuing to be checked, just in case, but I'm convinced that Clark was telling the truth ... In the circumstances, it would be awkward to ...'

Which actually meant:

'We're dealing with a man of the world, protected by the embassy of the United States. In the circumstances, don't interfere, because you might upset him with your lack of tact. Concentrate on the people in the basement, the domestics and everyone else. Leave Clark to me!'

'Very well, your honour! Have a good evening, your honour ...'

And, turning to his wife:

'You may serve, Madame Maigret!'

It was just after midnight. The huge corridor of the Police Judiciaire was empty and dimly lit, as if permeated with a dust-filled fog. Maigret's polished shoes, which he seldom wore, creaked like those of a boy making his first communion.

In his office, he began by stoking the stove and warming his hands, then, his pipe between his teeth, he opened the door to the inspectors' office.

Ducuing was there, busy telling Torrence a story that must have been amusing, because both men were in a very good mood.

‘Well, then?’

And Maigret sat down on a corner of the ink-stained wooden table and shook the ash from his pipe on the floor. Here, you could be as slovenly as you liked and tip your hat on to the back of your neck. The two inspectors had had beer sent up from the Brasserie Dauphine, and Maigret was pleased to see that they hadn’t forgotten him.

‘You know, boss, he’s an odd sort, this Clark. I went and had a look at him at the bar of the Majestic, just to get a better idea and fix his description in my head ... Seeing him like that, he looks like a businessman and an awkward customer ... Well, now that I know how he spent his time last night, I can assure you he’s quite a lad ...’

Torrence couldn’t help squinting at Maigret’s dazzlingly white shirt front with its two pearl buttons: it wasn’t often that they saw him dressed like that.

‘Listen to this ... First, he and the girl had dinner in a cheap restaurant in Rue Lepic ... You know the kind of place I mean? ... The owner remembers them, because he isn’t often asked for real champagne ... Then they asked where they could find a carousel ... They couldn’t explain themselves very well ... In the end, they were sent to the fair near Place de la Nation ...

‘There, I picked up their trail again ... I don’t know if they went on the carousel, but I assume so ... They also spent some time at the shooting gallery. I know that, because Clark spent more than a hundred francs there, which certainly surprised the woman running it ...

‘You see what I’m getting at ... Walking arm in arm in the crowd, like a couple of young lovers ... But hold on ... You haven’t heard the best bit yet ...

‘You know Strong-Arm Eugène’s stand? ... At the end of the show, Eugène issued a challenge to the crowd ... Right now he has a wrestler working with him ... Well, our Mr Clark took up the challenge against him ... He went and got undressed behind a tatty piece of cloth and gave Eugène’s wrestler a real thrashing ... I imagine the girl must have been in the front row, cheering him on ... Apparently, people were yelling:

“Go on, Englishman! ... Bite his nose off! ...”

‘After which, our lovers went dancing at the Moulin de la Galette ... By three o’clock they were at the Coupole, eating grilled sausages, and I assume that after that they went quietly to bed ...

‘The Hotel Aiglon doesn’t have a porter, only a night watchman who sleeps in a box room and pulls the rope without taking too much notice of who comes in ... He remembers hearing someone speaking English at about four in the morning ... He claims nobody went out ...

‘There it is! Don’t you think that for people staying at the Majestic, it’s a strange way to spend an evening?’

Maigret said neither yes nor no, checked the time on his wristwatch, which he only wore on special occasions (it had been a present for his twentieth wedding anniversary), and left the table he had been using as a seat.

‘Have a good night, boys ...’

He was already at the door when he retraced his steps and finished his glass of beer. He had to walk two or three hundred metres before he found a taxi.

‘Rue Fontaine ...’

It was one o’clock in the morning. The nightlife of Montmartre was in full swing. A negro greeted him at the doorway of the Pélican, and he was obliged to leave his hat and overcoat in the cloakroom. As he walked into the room, where streamers and multicoloured cotton balls fluttered overhead, he swayed a little, like a man who isn’t especially comfortable.

‘A table by the dance-floor? ... This way! ... Are you alone? ...’

He almost muttered to the head waiter, who hadn’t recognized him:

‘Idiot!’

The barman, though, had spotted him from a distance and was already whispering something to the two hostesses standing with their elbows on the mahogany bar.

Maigret sat down, like a customer, and, as there was no beer on offer, ordered a *fine à l’eau*. Before ten minutes had passed, the owner, who had been informed, sat down facing him.

‘No trouble, I hope, sir? ... You know I’ve always been straight and ...’

He was looking around the room, searching for anyone who might have provoked this unexpected visit from the police.

‘It’s all right ...’ Maigret replied. ‘I just felt like a bit of entertainment ...’

He took his pipe from his pocket, realized from the owner's expression that it would be out of place and put it back with a sigh.

'If you need any information at all ...' the other man murmured, with a wink. 'But I know all my staff ... I don't think we have anyone here right now who might be of interest to you ... As for the customers, well, you can see for yourself ... The usual crowd ... Foreigners, provincials ... That man over there, with Léa, is a deputy ...'

Maigret stood up and walked heavily to the staircase that led down to the toilets. They were in a large, well-lit room in the basement, its walls covered in blue porcelain. Polished mahogany phone booths. Mirrors. And on a long table, a multitude of implements: combs, brushes, a manicure kit, powder in every imaginable shade, lipsticks ...

'It's always the same when you dance with him! Pass me a pair of stockings, Charlotte ...'

A short woman was sitting on a chair with her evening dress hitched up. She had already taken off one stocking, and sat there gazing at her bare foot while Charlotte rummaged in a drawer.

'Still 44 sheer?'

'That's it! ... Give it to me! ... When a man can't dance, at least he should ...'

She saw Maigret in the mirror and continued putting on her new stockings, throwing him a little glance from time to time. Charlotte, turning, now also saw the inspector and went pale.

'Oh, it's you ...'

She tried to laugh. She was no longer quite the same woman as the one who had been putting her feet up on the stove and stuffing herself with pastries in that little house in Saint-Cloud.

Her blonde hair was so carefully groomed that the folds seemed permanent. Her skin was candy-pink. A simple black silk dress emphasized her soft figure, and over it she wore a dainty lace apron, the kind you hardly ever see except on a maid in a drawing-room comedy.

'I'll pay you for this with the rest, Charlotte ...'

'Of course ...'

The small woman realized that the visitor was waiting for her to leave and, after putting her shoes back on, she rushed upstairs. As for Charlotte, who was

pretending to put away the toilet articles, she at last made up her mind to ask:

‘What do you want with me?’

Maigret did not reply. He had just sat down on the chair vacated by the woman with the new stockings. He took advantage of being in the basement to fill a pipe, slowly and meticulously.

‘If you think I know anything, you’re wrong ...’

Isn’t it remarkable that it’s the women who are placid by temperament who are most inclined to show their emotions? Charlotte would have liked to remain calm, but she couldn’t stop her face from becoming mottled with red, nor her hands from picking up the objects so clumsily that she dropped a nail buffer.

‘I was absolutely sure, from the way you looked at me at our house earlier on, that you assumed ...’

‘Of course, you’ve never known a dancer or hostess named Mimi, have you?’

‘Never!’

‘And yet you yourself were a hostess in Cannes for a long time ... You were there at the same time as this Mimi ...’

‘There’s more than one nightclub in Cannes, and you can’t know everybody ...’

‘You were at the Belle Étoile, weren’t you?’

‘What of it?’

‘Nothing ... I just dropped by for a little chat ...’

They were silent for a good five minutes, because a customer came down, washed his hands, combed his hair, then asked for a cloth to buff up his brightly polished shoes. When at last he had left a five-franc coin in the saucer, Maigret resumed:

‘I have a lot of sympathy for Prosper Donge ... I wager he’s the best man in the world ...’

‘You have no idea!’ she exclaimed passionately.

‘He had a difficult childhood and seems to have always struggled to ...’

‘What if I told you he doesn’t have his school certificate and that everything he knows he taught himself? ... If you had a look in his coffee room, you’d find books that people like us don’t usually read ... He’s always had a passion for learning ... His dream would have been ...’

She broke off and tried to regain her composure.

‘Did the phone just ring?’

‘No ...’

‘What was I saying?’

‘That his dream would have been ...’

‘Oh, there’s no secret about it. He would have liked to have a son, and to make someone of him ... He made the wrong choice with me, poor man ... Since my operation, I can’t have children ...’

‘Do you know Jean Ramuel?’

‘No! I know he’s the bookkeeper and that he’s sick, that’s all. Prosper doesn’t talk much about the Majestic ... Not like me, I tell him everything that goes on here ...’

Now that he had reassured her, he tried to get a little bit further.

‘You see, what struck me was that ... I shouldn’t tell you this ... It’s confidential while the investigation’s still going on ... But I’m sure it’ll stay between ourselves ... Believe it or not, the revolver that was found in this Mrs Clark’s bag was bought the day before from a gunsmith in Faubourg Saint-Honoré ... Don’t you think that’s odd? ... A rich woman, married, with a son, arriving from New York, staying at a luxury hotel on the Champs-Élysées, who suddenly feels the need to buy a revolver ... And not some pretty little ladies’ revolver, mind you, but a serious firearm ...’

He was avoiding looking at her, staring instead at the shiny tips of his shoes, as if surprised to see himself looking so well turned out.

‘When you consider the fact that a few hours later this same woman slips down to the basement of the hotel by the service stairs ... Hard not to assume she’s arranged to meet someone ... Or that it’s in anticipation of that meeting that she bought her gun ... Now suppose that this woman, who’s so respectable these days, had a turbulent past and that a witness of that past tried to blackmail her ... Do you know if Ramuel ever lived on the Côte d’Azur? ... Or a professional dancer known as Zebio? ...’

‘I don’t know him.’

Without looking at her, he knew she was on the verge of tears.

‘There’s someone else, the night porter, who could have killed her, because he went down to the basement at about six in the morning ... Prosper Donge heard his steps on the service stairs ... Not to mention that any of the floor waiters ...’

It's a pity, really, that you didn't know Mimi in Cannes ... You might have been able to tell me something about the people she rubbed shoulders with in those days ... Never mind! ... I'd have liked to avoid having to go to Cannes ... It wouldn't look good if I found someone down there who knew her ...'

He stood up, emptied his pipe and searched in his pocket as if to put small change in the saucer.

'You wouldn't do that!' she protested.

'Goodnight ... I wonder what time there's a train ...'

As soon as he got back upstairs, he paid for his drink and hurried to the bar opposite, a café-tobacconist's frequented by the staff of all the nightclubs in the area.

'Phone, please ...'

He called the telephone exchange.

'Police Judiciaire here. Somebody's probably going to call you from the Pélican and ask you for a number in Cannes. Don't put them through too quickly ... Wait till I get there ...'

Just enough time to jump into a taxi. He rushed to the exchange and presented himself to the night supervisor.

'Give me a pair of headphones ... Has anyone asked for Cannes?'

'Just now ... I checked the number ... It's the Brasserie des Artistes, which is open all night ... Shall I put them through?'

Maigret put on the headphones and waited. A number of female employees, also wearing headphones, watched him curiously.

'We're putting you through to 18-43 in Cannes, mademoiselle ...'

'Thanks ... Hello, Brasserie des Artistes? ... Who's that? ... Is it you, Jean? ... This is Charlotte ... That's right! ... Charlotte from the Belle Étoile ... Wait ... Let me close the door ... I think there's someone here ...'

You could hear her talking, probably to a customer. Then the noise of a door closing.

'Listen, Jean ... This is very important ... I'll write and explain ... Or rather, no, it's too dangerous ... I'll come and see you later, when it's all over ... Is Gigi still there? ... What? ... No change there, then ... You absolutely have to tell her that, if she's asked about Mimi ... Do you remember Mimi? ... No, you weren't there yet! ... Anyway, if she's asked anything about her ... That's right, she

doesn't know a thing! ... Above all, she shouldn't say anything about Prosper ...'

'What Prosper?' Jean asked at the other end of the line.

'Never mind ... She doesn't know any Prosper, have you got that? Or any Mimi ... Hello? Don't cut us off ... Who's on the line?'

Maigret heard the alarm in her voice: the idea may have crossed her mind that someone was listening in to the conversation.

'Have you got that, Jean? ... Can I count on you? ... I'll hang up now, because there's someone ...'

Maigret took off his headphones and relit his pipe, which had gone out.

'Did you find out what you wanted?' the supervisor asked.

'Maybe ... Get me Gare de Lyon ... I need to know the time of the next train to Cannes ... As long as ...'

He looked down testily at his dinner jacket. As long as he had time to ...

'Hello? ... What's that? ... Four seventeen? ... And I'll get there at two in the afternoon? ... Thanks ...'

Just time to rush back to Boulevard Richard-Lenoir and laugh over Madame Maigret's dismay.

'My suit, quickly ... A shirt ... Socks ...'

At 4.17, he was on the train bound for the Côte d'Azur, sitting opposite a lady with a horrible Pekinese on her lap who kept giving Maigret funny looks, doubtless suspecting him of not liking dogs.

At about the same time, Charlotte was getting into a taxi, as she did every night. It was a taxi that worked mainly with the customers of the Pélican and which took her home for free.

At five o'clock, Prosper Donge heard a car door slamming, the noise of the engine, footsteps, the key in the lock.

But he didn't hear the usual *phffft* of the gas in the kitchen. Without stopping on the ground floor, Charlotte rushed upstairs and opened the door, yelling:

'Prosper! ... Listen! Don't pretend to sleep ... The inspector ...'

Before going any further, she had to undo the button of her brassiere and pull her girdle down, twisting her stockings as she did so.

'We have to talk seriously! Come on, get up! ... It isn't easy talking to a man who's lying down!'



4. Gigi and the Carnival

For three hours, Maigret had the unpleasant impression that he was wading in a kind of no man's land between reality and dream. Was it his fault? As far as Lyons and further, perhaps as far as Montélimar, the train had sped through a tunnel of wet fog. The woman with the little dog hadn't left her seat opposite the inspector, and there were no empty compartments. Maigret had been unable to get comfortable. It was too hot. When the window was lowered, it was too cold.

So he had gone to the restaurant car and, to buck himself up, had drunk a bit of everything, first coffee, then liqueur brandy, then beer.

About eleven, feeling queasy, he had told himself it might be better if he ate something and had ordered ham and eggs, which went down no better than the rest.

In short, he felt the effects of his sleepless night, the hours on the train; he was on edge. Leaving Marseilles, he fell asleep in his corner, with his mouth open, giving a start when he heard the cry 'Cannes!' and sitting there dazed for a moment.

Mimosas everywhere, and sunlight so bright it might have been the Fourteenth of July. Mimosas on the engines, on the carriages, on the iron pillars of the station! And a swarm of travellers in bright clothes, men in white trousers ...

Dozens of them emerged from a railcar, wearing peaked caps and carrying brass instruments. As soon as he left the station, he ran into another brass band, blaring its bright notes into the air.

It was a riot of light, sounds and colours. Everywhere there were flags and banners, and above all, everywhere there were golden mimosas giving off a

sugary smell that pervaded the whole town.

‘Excuse me, sergeant,’ he asked a policeman who looked equally festive, ‘could you tell me what’s going on?’

The policeman looked at him as if he had just arrived from another planet. ‘Haven’t you heard about the flower parade?’

Other brass bands were crisscrossing the streets, heading for the sea, which could be glimpsed occasionally, pastel blue, at the end of a street.

He was long to remember a little girl dressed as a pierrette being dragged along quickly by her mother, probably to get a good view of the parade. There wouldn’t have been anything remarkable about it if the little girl hadn’t been wearing an extraordinary mask, with a long nose, red cheekbones and a droopy moustache like a Chinaman’s. Her plump little legs scurried beneath her ...

He didn’t need to ask for directions. As he neared the Croisette, he spotted a sign along a quiet street: ‘Brasserie des Artistes’. Further on, a door: ‘Hotel’. He could see immediately what kind of hotel it was.

He went in. Four customers, dressed in black, with white shirt fronts and stiff ties, were playing belote until it was time for them to start their shift as croupiers at the casino. A girl sat by the window, eating sauerkraut. The waiter was wiping the tables. A young man who was probably the owner was reading a newspaper behind the counter. And from outside, from far and near, from everywhere, came the echoes of brass bands and the overpowering smell of mimosas, dust stirred by the feet of the crowd, cries, car horns hooting ...

‘A beer!’ Maigret grunted, at last divesting himself of his heavy overcoat. He was almost embarrassed to be dressed as darkly as the croupiers. As soon as he entered, there had been an exchange of looks between him and the owner.

‘Tell me, Monsieur Jean ...’

Monsieur Jean was obviously thinking: ‘He’s probably a cop ...’

‘Have you had this brasserie for a long time?’

‘I took it over nearly three years ago ... Why?’

‘And before that?’

‘If it’s any of your business, before that I was a barman at the Café de la Paix in Monte Carlo ...’

Less than a hundred metres away, the length of the Croisette, the grand hotels stood in a row: the Carlton, the Miramar, the Martinez, and others ...

It was clear that the Brasserie des Artistes was something like the backstage area of that elegant life. The same was true of the whole street: dry cleaners', hairdressers', bistros for chauffeurs, all kinds of little trades in the shadow of the big hotels.

'The brasserie's open all night, isn't it?'

'Yes, all night ...'

Not for the winter visitors, but for the staff of the casino and the hotels, for the dancers, the hostesses, the bellboys, the go-betweens of all kinds, pimps, horse race tipsters, nightclub touts.

'Do you still need me?' Monsieur Jean asked quite curtly.

'I'd like you to tell me where I can find a woman named Gigi ...'

'Gigi? ... Never heard of her ...'

The girl with the sauerkraut was watching them with weary eyes. The croupiers stood up: it was almost three.

'Tell me, Monsieur Jean ... Have you ever been in trouble over slot machines or anything like that? ...'

'What business is it of yours?'

'I ask the question because, if you've already got a record, the case would become much more serious ... Charlotte's a nice woman ... She phones her friends to ask them a favour, but forgets to tell them what it's all about ... Now when you have a business like yours, and you've already been in a bit of trouble, you generally don't want to get your feet wet ... Anyway, I'm going to phone the Vice Squad and I don't think they'll have any problem telling me where I can find Gigi ... Do you have a token?'

He had stood up and was already heading for the phone booth.

'Hold on! You mentioned getting my feet wet ... Is it serious?'

'Actually, it's a murder ... When a detective chief inspector from Special Branch comes expressly all the way from Paris, you'd be right to think that ...'

'Wait a second, sir ... Are you sure you want to see Gigi?'

'That's what I came a thousand kilometres for ...'

'Come with me! But I warn you, she won't be able to tell you much ... Do you know her? ... Two days out of three she's no good for anything ... When she's got hold of drugs, you know what I mean? ... Well, yesterday ...'

‘Yesterday, after Charlotte’s phone call, as if by chance, she found some, didn’t she? Where is she?’

‘Through here! ... She has a room somewhere in town, but last night she couldn’t even walk ...’

A door led to the staircase of the hotel. The owner pointed to a room on the mezzanine.

‘Someone for you, Gigi!’ he cried.

And he waited on the landing until Maigret had closed the door behind him. After which, shrugging his shoulders, he went back to his counter and, a trifle worried in spite of everything, resumed his newspaper.

The closed curtains let only a halo of light through. The room was in a mess. On the iron bedstead, a woman was lying, fully dressed, her hair dishevelled, her face in the pillow. In a thick voice she began by asking:

‘’t is it? ...’

Then an eye appeared, a grim-looking eye.

‘... you already here? ...’

Pinched nostrils. A waxy complexion. Gigi was thin and angular and as brown as a prune.

‘... time is it? ... Aren’t you getting undressed? ...’

She raised herself on one elbow to drink a sip of water, looked at Maigret as she made an effort to recover her composure and, seeing him sitting solemnly on a chair beside her bed, asked:

‘Are you the doctor? ...’

‘What did Monsieur Jean tell you last night?’

‘Jean? ... He’s a decent sort, Jean ... He gave me ... But what business is it of yours?’

‘He gave you cocaine, I know ... Don’t get up ... And he talked to you about Mimi and Prosper ...’

Outside, there were still brass bands coming closer then moving away, and there was still that distinctive sickly smell of mimosas, a smell like no other.

‘Good old Prosper! ...’

She spoke as if in a dream. At times, her voice sounded almost childlike. Then suddenly she would screw up her eyes, and her forehead would crease as if at

some fleeting but sharp pain. She had a coated tongue.

‘Hey, you got any?’

She wanted more drugs. Maigret had the unpleasant impression that he was dragging secrets out of a sick, delirious woman.

‘You liked Prosper, didn’t you?’

‘He isn’t like other men ... He’s too good ... He should never have ended up with a woman like Mimi, but that’s always the way ... Have you met him?’

On with it! After all, wasn’t this Maigret’s role?

‘That was when he was at the Miramar, wasn’t it? ... The three of you were dancers at the Belle Étoile ... Mimi, Charlotte and you ...’

Solemnly, she stammered:

‘You shouldn’t speak badly of Charlotte ... She’s a good girl ... And she was in love with Prosper ... If he’d listened to me ...’

‘I suppose you used to meet up at the brasserie, when you weren’t working ... Prosper was Mimi’s lover ...’

‘He was so much in love with her, it turned him stupid ... Poor Prosper! ... And afterwards, when she ...’

Suddenly she sat up, suspicious:

‘Are you really a friend of Prosper?’

‘When she had a child, is that it? ...’

‘Who told you that? I’m the only one she wrote to ... But that’s not how it started ...’

She pricked up her ears at the music, which had come closer again.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘Nothing ...’

The floats parading along the Croisette, their departure announced with cannon shots. A blazing sun, the calm sea, motor-boats tracing rings on the water, little sailing boats gracefully tilting ...

‘Are you sure you don’t have any? ... Couldn’t you go and ask Jean for some? ...’

‘Did she leave with the American first?’

‘Is it Prosper who told you that? ... Give me another glass of water, if you’re a decent sort ... A Yankee she met at the Belle Étoile, who fell in love with her ... He took her to Deauville, then Biarritz ... Mind you, Mimi knew how to behave

... She wasn't like us ... Does Charlotte still work at the Pélican? ... As for me, well ...'

She laughed, a horrible laugh that revealed bad teeth.

'One fine day, she wrote out of the blue that she was going to have a baby and that she was fixing it so the American would believe the child was his ... What was his name again? ... Oswald. Then, another time, she wrote that it had almost gone wrong because the baby had hair as red as a carrot ... Can you imagine? ... I didn't want anyone to tell Prosper ...'

Was it the effect of the two glasses of water she had drunk? She lifted her legs out of the bed, first one, then the other, long, thin legs that were unlikely to attract looks from men. When she was on her feet, you saw how tall and skeletal she was. How many hours she must have spent pacing the dark pavements or lingering at a café table until she got any kind of result!

Her gaze had become more fixed. She was looking Maigret up and down.

'You're police, aren't you?'

Anger was rising in her. But there was still a haziness in her memory and she was making an effort to dispel it.

'What did Jean tell me? ... Wait! ... Who let you in anyway? ... He made me promise not to tell anyone ... Admit it! ... Admit you're police ... And me ... Why should the police care if Prosper and Mimi ...'

The outburst came all of a sudden, violent and sickening:

'You bastard! ... You swine! ... You took advantage of me when I was ...'

She had opened the door and the noises came in even more distinctly from outside.

'If you don't go right now, I ... I ...'

It was ridiculous, pitiful. Maigret was almost hit on the legs with a water jug, and she was still yelling insults at him as he descended the stairs.

The brasserie was empty. It was still the slack time of day.

'Well?' Monsieur Jean asked, from his counter.

Maigret put his coat and hat back on and left some coins for the waiter.

'Did she tell you what you wanted?'

A voice, from the hotel staircase:

'Jean! ... Jean! ... Come here, I need to talk to you ...'

It was Gigi, pathetic as ever, who had come down in her stockinged feet, hair dishevelled, and half opened the door to the brasserie.

Maigret preferred to leave.

Out on the Croisette, in his black overcoat and his bowler hat, he must have looked like a provincial making his first visit to the Cote d'Azur for carnival. Masked figures jostled him. He freed himself with difficulty from the lines of dancers. On the beach, a few winter holidaymakers were sunbathing, indifferent to the festivities: almost naked bodies, already tanned, covered in oil ...

The Miramar was there, a huge yellow mass, with its two or three hundred windows, its porter, its doormen, its touts ... He almost went in ... What was the point?

Didn't he know all he wanted to know? He was no longer sure if he was thirsty or if he had drunk too much. He went into a bar.

'Do you have the railway timetable?'

'Are you going to Paris? There's an express at eight forty ...'

He had another beer. He still had hours to kill. He didn't know what to do. Subsequently, he was left with a nightmarish memory of those hours spent in the festive atmosphere of Cannes.

At times, the past became so real to him that he literally saw Prosper, with his red hair, big kindly eyes and pockmarked face, emerge from the Miramar through the little back door and drop by the Brasserie des Artistes.

The three women, who were eight years younger at the time, were there, having lunch or dinner. Prosper was ugly. He knew it. And he was madly in love with Mimi, the youngest and prettiest of the three.

Hadn't they laughed at first at his passionate glances?

'You're wrong, Mimi,' Charlotte must have said. 'He's a nice man. You never know what might happen ...'

Then the Belle Étoile in the evening. Prosper never set foot there. It wasn't his place. But in the early hours, he would meet up with them again over an onion soup at the brasserie ...

'If a man like that was in love with me ...'

Because Charlotte must have been susceptible to such a humble passion. Gigi wasn't yet taking cocaine.

‘Don’t be too upset, Monsieur Prosper! ... She pretends to make fun of you, but deep down ...’

And they had been lovers! They may even have started living together! Prosper spent most of his savings on gifts! Until the day a passing American ... Had Charlotte told him, later, that the child was definitely his?

Good old Charlotte! She knew he didn’t love her, that he still loved Mimi, and yet she lived pleasantly enough with him in the little house in Saint-Cloud!

While Gigi had continued to decline ...

‘Flowers to send, monsieur ... For your girlfriend ...’

The florist was being ironic, because Maigret couldn’t have looked much like a man who has a girlfriend. All the same, he sent a basket of mimosas to Madame Maigret.

Then, as there was still half an hour before the train left, a kind of intuition led him to ask to be put through to Paris. It was in a little bar near the station. The musicians from the brass bands now had dusty trousers. They were leaving, carriages full of them, for the neighbouring towns, and there was a weariness in the air, the kind you feel at the end of a sunny Sunday.

‘Hello! Is that you, boss? ... Are you still in Cannes?’

Lucas was emotional, you could hear it in his voice.

‘There have been developments here ... Judge Bonneau is furious ... He just phoned to find out what you were doing ... Hello? It was only discovered three-quarters of an hour ago ... It was Torrence, who was on duty at the Majestic, who phoned ...’

Maigret, motionless in the narrow booth, listened, grunting from time to time. In the setting sun flooding the bar through the skylight, he could see musicians in their white cotton trousers and silver-braided caps, and occasionally, as a joke, one of them drew a long-held note from his helicon or his trombone, while an opaline liquid glistened in the glasses.

‘All right! ... I’ll be there tomorrow morning ... No! ... Obviously ... Well, if the judge is set on it, let him arrest him ...’

It had only just happened, so to speak ... The cellars of the Majestic ... The tea dance in full swing, music seeping through all the partitions ... Prosper Donge, like a big goldfish in his glass cage ... Jean Ramuel, as yellow as a quince, in his ...

From what Lucas said – although the investigation hadn't begun yet – the night porter had been seen passing along the corridors, in his city clothes. Nobody knew what he had been doing there. Everyone had enough to occupy themselves with not to worry about what was happening opposite.

The night porter's name was Justin Colleboeuf. He was a small, calm, colourless man who spent his nights all alone in the lobby. He didn't read. He had nobody to talk to. He didn't sleep either. For hours on end, he waited, sitting on a chair, looking straight ahead.

His wife was the concierge of a new apartment block in Neuilly.

What was Colleboeuf doing there at half past four in the afternoon?

Zebio, the dancer, had gone to the locker room to get his dinner jacket. Everyone had moved around. Several times, Ramuel had emerged from his cage.

At five o'clock, Prosper Donge had made his way to the locker room. He had swapped his white uniform jacket for his civilian jacket, put on his coat and collected his bicycle.

A few minutes later, one of the bellboys had gone into the locker room. He had noticed that the door of locker 89 was slightly ajar. A moment later, he had alerted everyone with his yelling.

In the locker, a slumped body in a grey overcoat, that of the night porter. His soft hat was at the bottom of the locker.

Like Mrs Clark, Justin Colleboeuf had been strangled. The body was still warm.

During that time, Prosper Donge had been riding peacefully on his bicycle through the Bois de Boulogne, crossing the Pont de Saint-Cloud, getting off to climb the sloping street that led to his house.

'A pastis!' Maigret ordered, because that was the only thing he saw on the counter.

After which, he took the train, his head as heavy as when, as a child, he had gone on a picnic that had lasted too long in the oppressive sun.



5. The Spittle on the Window

The train had been in motion for a while now. Maigret had already taken off his jacket, his tie and his false collar, because once again the compartment was overheated, or rather you had the impression that a special kind of heat, smelling of train, was oozing from everywhere, the walls, the floor, the seats.

He bent forwards to untie his shoelaces. Too bad if his superiors kicked up a fuss: not content with his free first-class ticket, he had paid for a couchette. In addition, the ticket inspector had promised him that he would be on his own in the compartment.

Suddenly, as he was still stooped over his shoes, he had the unpleasant impression that someone was watching him from close by. He looked up. Out there in the corridor, behind the glass, was a pale face. Two dark eyes. A big, badly made-up mouth, made all the bigger by two haphazardly traced lines of red lipstick that seemed to have run.

But the most striking thing was the expression of contempt, of hate. How had Gigi got here? Maigret hadn't even had time to put his shoe back on when she made a disgusted face and spat in his direction, on to the window, then moved away along the corridor.

Impassively, he dressed again. Before leaving his compartment, he lit a pipe, as if to compose himself. Then he set off along the corridors, going from carriage to carriage, looking into every compartment. The train was a long one. Maigret crossed at least ten vestibules, bumped into walls, disturbed fifty people.

'Excuse me ... Excuse me ...'

The carpeting came to an end. He was now in third class. People were dozing, six to a bench. Others were eating. Children stared straight ahead.

In a compartment containing two sailors from Toulon on a furlough to Paris and an old couple nodding their heads gently, their mouths open, the woman not letting go of the basket on her knees, he found Gigi huddled in a corner.

Earlier, in the corridor, he hadn't noticed how she was dressed. Nor had he realized, startled as he was, that this was no longer the Gigi of the Brasserie des Artistes with her blurry eyes and flabby lips.

Wrapped in a two-thousand-franc fur coat, her legs crossed, displaying well-turned heels and a large ladder in her stocking, she was looking straight ahead of her. Had she managed all alone to drag herself out of the comatose state in which he had found her that afternoon? Had she been given some medicine? Or was it a new dose of cocaine that had put her back on her feet?

She became aware of Maigret's presence in the corridor, but did not move. He stood looking at her for a while, trying to signal to her; she still took no notice of him. So he opened the door.

'Will you come out here for a moment?'

She hesitated. The two sailors were watching her. Should she make a scene? With a shrug, she stood up and joined him. He closed the door behind her.

'Haven't you had enough yet?' she said grudgingly. 'You must be pleased, eh? You must be proud! You took advantage of a poor girl like me being in that state ...'

He realized that she was on the verge of tears, that her badly painted mouth was swelling, and he turned his head away.

'And you wasted no time in locking him up, did you?'

'Tell me, Gigi. How do you know that Prosper's been arrested?'

A weary gesture. 'Don't you know about it yet? I thought you tapped phones these days ... I might as well tell you, you'll find out soon enough ... Charlotte phoned Jean ... Prosper had just got back from work when a taxi filled with cops arrived and took him away ... Charlotte's beside herself ... She wanted to know if I'd talked ... And I did talk, didn't I? ... I said enough for you to ...'

A sudden violent jolt of the train pushed her up against Maigret, and she recoiled in horror.

‘You won’t finish him off, I swear to you! ... Even if Prosper really did kill that bitch Mimi ... Let me tell you something, inspector ... Take it from Gigi, the lowest of the low, a slut who has nothing to lose, if he’s sentenced, I swear to you I’ll find you and put a bullet in you ...’

She waited a moment, seething with contempt. He said nothing. He sensed it wasn’t just an idle threat, that she really was the kind of woman who’d wait for him on a street corner and empty the contents of an automatic revolver into him.

From the compartment, the two sailors were still watching them.

‘Goodnight,’ he sighed.

He went back to his compartment, undressed at last and lay down.

The night light on the ceiling gave off a vague blue glimmer. Lying there with his eyes closed, Maigret frowned.

A question was nagging at him. Why had Judge Bonneau ordered the arrest of Prosper Donge? What had the magistrate, who hadn’t left Paris, who didn’t know Gigi, or the Brasserie des Artistes, found out? Why arrest Donge rather than Jean Ramuel or Zebio?

He felt a vague anxiety. He knew the judge.

He hadn’t said anything when he had seen him show up at the Majestic along with the public prosecutor, but he had grimaced, because he had had occasion to work with him before.

The judge was an honest man, true, a good man even, a family man, a collector of rare books. He had a handsome square grey beard. Once, Maigret had been called out with him for a raid on an illegal gambling den. It was in the middle of the day, when there was nobody on the premises, and there were dust covers over the baccarat tables. Pointing at them, Judge Bonneau had asked innocently:

‘Are these billiard tables?’

Then, with the same naivety, that of a man who has never set foot in a place of ill repute, he had expressed surprise that there were three exits, leading to three different streets, including one that went through the cellars and ended up in another building. He had been equally surprised to learn, from the cashbooks, that some gamblers received large advances, being unaware that, in order to make people gamble, it is necessary to entice them.

Why had Bonneau suddenly decided to have Donge arrested?

Maigret slept badly, waking up at each stop, mixing up the noises and movements of the train with his nightmares.

When he got off at Gare de Lyon, it was still dark, and a fine, icy rain was falling. Lucas was there, the collar of his coat turned up, stamping his feet to keep warm.

‘Not too tired, boss?’

‘Do you have anyone with you?’

‘No ... If you need an inspector, I saw one of our boys at the railway police office ...’

‘Go and get him ...’

Gigi got off, shook hands amicably with the two sailors and shrugged as she passed Maigret. She had gone a few steps when she changed her mind.

‘You can have me followed if you like ... I can tell you right now, I’m going to see Charlotte ...’

Lucas came back. ‘I couldn’t find the inspector ...’

‘Never mind ... Come on ...’

They took a taxi.

‘Now, tell me ... How come the judge ...’

‘I was getting to that ... He sent for me when the second murder had taken place and he’d already issued an arrest warrant for Donge ... He asked me if we had anything new, if you’d phoned and so on. Then, with a wicked smile, he handed me a letter ... An anonymous letter ... I can’t remember the exact words ... But the gist was that Mrs Clark, who used to be a dancer who went by the name of Mimi, had been Donge’s mistress, that she had a child by him and that he had threatened her several times ... You seem upset, boss ...’

‘Carry on ...’

‘That’s all ... The judge was delighted ... You see, it’s quite a simple story!’ he concluded. ‘An ordinary case of blackmail ... And since Mrs Clark presumably wouldn’t go along with it ... I’ll go and question Donge later in his cell ...’

‘Has the judge been to see him?’

But the taxi had stopped on Quai des Orfèvres. It was half past five in the morning. A yellowish fog was rising from the Seine. The door slammed.

‘Is he in the cells? ... Come with me ...’

They had to go around the outside of the Palais de Justice to get to Quai de l'Horloge and they did so on foot, slowly.

'Yes ... About nine in the evening, the judge phoned me again to tell me that Donge was refusing to say anything ... Apparently, he declared that he'd only talk to you ...'

'Have you had any sleep tonight?'

'Two hours, on a divan ...'

'Go and get some sleep ... Come back about midday ...'

Maigret entered the area where the cells were. A police van was just coming out. There had been a raid in the Bastille area, and some thirty women had been brought in, along with a few foreigners without identity cards. In the huge, badly lit hall, they were sitting on boards. There was an all-pervasive barracks smell, and you could hear hoarse voices, obscene jokes.

'Take me to Donge ... Is he asleep?'

'He hasn't slept a wink ... You'll see for yourself ...'

Individual cubicles with barred doors, like the boxes in a stable. In one of them, a man was sitting with his head in his hands. All you could see was a vague figure in the half-light.

The key turned in the lock. The hinges creaked. The man got to his feet, tall, broad and sluggish, looking as if he'd just emerged from a dream. His tie and shoelaces had been removed. His red hair was dishevelled.

'It's you, inspector ...' he murmured, passing his hand over his forehead as if to make sure it was indeed Maigret who was there.

'I hear you want to speak to me ...'

'I think it's best ...' And, with childlike innocence, he asked: 'The judge isn't angry, is he? ... What could I have said to him? ... He was sure I was guilty ... He even showed my hands to his clerk and said they were a strangler's hands ...'

'Come ...'

Maigret hesitated for a moment. What was the point of putting handcuffs on him? They must have handcuffed him when they brought him to the cells. He still bore the marks on his wrists.

One behind the other, they walked along strange corridors vaguely – but only vaguely – reminiscent of the basement of the Majestic. Passing beneath the vast

Palais de Justice, they reached the premises of the Police Judiciaire, where they emerged suddenly into a brightly lit corridor.

‘Come in ... Have you eaten?’

Donge shook his head. Maigret, who was also hungry, and above all thirsty, sent the duty officer to fetch beer and sandwiches.

‘Sit down, Donge ... Gigi’s in Paris ... She’s probably with Charlotte by now ... Cigarette?’

He didn’t smoke cigarettes but always had some in his drawer. Prosper lit it awkwardly, like a man who, in a few hours, has lost all his self-confidence. He was embarrassed by his shoes, which gaped open, by the absence of a tie, by the smell of his clothes after a single night in the cells.

Maigret stoked the stove. In all the other offices, there was central heating, but he hated it and had obtained permission to keep the old cast-iron stove that had been there twenty years earlier.

‘Sit down ... They’ll bring us something to eat ...’

Donge was hesitating to say something and, when he at last made up his mind, stammered in an anxious voice:

‘Have you seen the boy?’

‘No ...’

‘I spotted him for a moment in the lobby of the hotel ... I swear to you, sir, he’s ...’

‘Your son, I know!’

‘You’ll see him! He has hair as red as mine. He has my hands, my big bones ... They used to laugh at me when I was a child because of my big bones ...’

The beer and sandwiches were brought in. Maigret ate on his feet, walking up and down the office while the sky over Paris began to lighten.

‘I can’t ...’ Donge sighed at last, putting his sandwich back on the tray. ‘I’m not hungry ... Whatever happens now, they won’t take me back at the Majestic, or anywhere else ...’

His voice was shaking. He was waiting for help, but Maigret was letting him flounder.

‘Do you also think I killed her?’

As Maigret did not reply, he shook his head in discouragement. He would have liked to explain everything at once, to persuade the inspector, but he didn’t

know where to start.

‘You have to understand, I’ve never had much experience with women ... In our profession ... And almost always in the basement ... Some people laughed when I got all sentimental ... With looks like mine, right? ... So when I met Mimi at the Brasserie des Artistes ... There were three of them ... You must know that ... Look at the way things work out ... If I’d chosen one of the other two ... But no, it had to be her I fell in love with ... Madly in love, inspector! ... So much in love, it turned me stupid! ... She could have done anything she wanted with me! ... And I imagined that one day she’d agree to marry me ... And do you know what the judge said to me last night? ... I can’t remember the exact words ... It made me sick ... He said that what I was interested in more than anything was the money she brought me ... He took me for a ...’

In order not to embarrass him, Maigret was looking through the window, watching the Seine turn pale silver.

‘She went off with that American ... I was hoping he’d abandon her when he got back to America and she’d come back to me ... One fine day, we heard that he had married her ... I was really sick ... It was Charlotte who put me back on my feet, like the pal she is ... I told her I couldn’t carry on living in Cannes ... Every street brought back memories ... I looked for a job in Paris ... Charlotte suggested coming with me. And, for quite a while, believe it or not, we lived like brother and sister ...’

‘Did you know that Mimi had a child?’ Maigret asked, emptying his pipe in the coal bucket.

‘I didn’t know anything, except that she was living somewhere in America ... It was only when Charlotte thought I’d got over it ... With time, you see, we’ve ended up being a real couple ... One evening, a neighbour came rushing in; he was beside himself ... His wife was going into labour, much earlier than they’d thought ... He was in a panic ... He asked for help ... Charlotte went over there ... The next day, she said to me:

“My poor Prosper ... The state you would have been in if ...”

‘And then, I don’t know how it happened ... One thing led to another, and she told me Mimi had a child ... Mimi had written to Gigi ... She told her she had used the child to get herself married, even though she was sure it was mine ...

‘I went to Cannes ... Gigi showed me the letter, which she’d kept, but refused to hand it over to me ... I think she burned it ...

‘I wrote to America ... I begged Mimi to give me my son, at the very least to send me a photograph ... She never replied ... I didn’t even know if the address was the right one ...

‘And I kept thinking at every moment: “My son is doing this ... My son is doing that ...”’

He fell silent, with a lump in his throat, while Maigret pretended to sharpen a pencil and doors started slamming in the Police Judiciaire offices.

‘Did Charlotte know you’d written?’

‘No! I wrote the letter at the hotel ... Three years went by ... One day, I was leafing through some foreign magazines the guests had left on the tables ... I jumped when I saw a photograph of Mimi with a five-year-old boy ... It was a newspaper from Detroit, Michigan, and the caption said something like: “The elegant Mrs Oswald J.Clark and her son, just back from a Pacific cruise” ... I wrote again ...’

‘What did you write?’ Maigret asked in an indifferent voice.

‘I can’t remember. I was half mad. I begged her to answer me. I said ... I think I said that I’d go over there and proclaim the truth and if she refused to hand over my son, I ...’

‘Well?’

‘I swear I wouldn’t have done it ... Yes, it’s possible I threatened to kill her ... When I think that she and the boy lived above my head for a whole week and I never even suspected ...

‘It took a chance remark ... You’ve seen the couriers’ room ... For those of us in the basement, names don’t exist ... We know that 117 has hot chocolate in the morning and 452 bacon and eggs ... We know 123’s maid and 216’s chauffeur ...

‘It happened stupidly ... I’d gone into the couriers’ room ... I heard a woman talking in English to a chauffeur and mentioning the name Mrs Clark ...

‘As I don’t speak English, I got the bookkeeper to question her ... He asked her if it was Mrs Clark from Detroit, and if she had her son with her ...

‘When I knew they were there, I tried for a whole day to catch a glimpse of them, either in the lobby, or in the corridor on their floor ... But we can’t move

around just as we'd like ... I didn't get anywhere ...

'Not to mention ... I don't know if you'll understand this ... If Mimi had asked me to take her back, I couldn't have done it ... Have I stopped being in love with her? ... It's possible! ... What's for sure is that I wouldn't have had the heart to leave Charlotte, who's been so good to me ...

'So I didn't want to disrupt her life ... I wanted her to find a way to give me back my son ... I'm sure that Charlotte would be only too happy to bring him up ...'

At that moment, Maigret looked at Prosper Donge and was struck by the intensity of his emotion. Anyone not knowing he had only drunk a glass of beer – and not even a whole glass! – would have sworn he was drunk. The blood had rushed to his head. His eyes were shining, big eyes that strained at their lids. He wasn't crying, but he was breathing heavily.

'Do you have children, inspector?'

It was Maigret's turn to look away, because not having any was the great sorrow of Madame Maigret's life. As for himself, he always carefully avoided the subject.

'The judge kept talking ... According to him, I'd done this and that for such and such a reason ... But that's not how it happened ... After a whole day when all my free time had been devoted to prowling around the private areas of the hotel, in the vain hope of catching a glimpse of my son ... I didn't know what I was doing any more ... And all the time, the phone ringing, the dumb waiters, my three helpers, coffee pots and milk jugs to be filled ... I sat down in a corner ...'

'You're talking about the coffee room?'

'Yes ... I wrote a letter ... I wanted to see Mimi ... It occurred to me that at six in the morning I was almost always on my own downstairs ... I begged her to come ...'

'You didn't threaten her?'

'Maybe, at the end of the letter ... Yes, I must have written that, if she didn't come in the next three days, I'd do whatever I had to ...'

'And what did you mean by that?'

'I don't know ...'

'Would you have killed her?'

‘I couldn’t have done that.’

‘Would you have abducted the child?’

He gave a weak, almost stupid smile. ‘Do you really think I could?’

‘Would you have told her husband everything?’

Donge’s eyes opened wide. ‘No! ... I swear to you! ... I think ... Yes, I think if it had come down to it, I’d more likely have killed her, in a moment of anger ... But that morning, I had a flat tyre when I got to Avenue Foch ... I arrived at the Majestic almost a quarter of an hour late ... I didn’t see Mimi ... I thought she’d come and, not finding me, had gone back up to her suite ... If I’d known that her husband had left, I’d have gone up by the service stairs ... But, once again, those of us in the basement don’t know anything about what goes on above our heads ... I was worried ... That morning, I can’t have looked normal ...’

Maigret interrupted suddenly. ‘What led you to go and open locker 89?’

‘I’ll tell you that straight away ... Actually, it’s proof I’m not lying, at least to anyone in the business, because, if I’d known she was dead, I wouldn’t have acted the way I did ... I guess it was about a quarter to nine when the waiter on the second floor sent down an order from 203 ... On the slip, it said – you can find it, the management keep them – anyway, it said: “One chocolate with croissants, two eggs with bacon and a tea” ...’

‘Meaning what?’

‘Wait! I knew the chocolate was for the boy and the bacon and eggs for the nurse ... In other words, only two people ... The other days, at the same time, there was always an order for a black coffee and Melba toast for Mimi ... So on the tray I also put the black coffee and the Melba toast ... I sent up the dumb waiter ... A few moments later, the black coffee and the Melba toast came back down ... You may think it’s strange to attach such importance to that kind of detail ... But don’t forget that, in the basement, it’s pretty much all we know of the world ...’

‘I picked up the phone.

“Hello! Didn’t Mrs Clark want her breakfast?”

“Mrs Clark isn’t in her room ...”

‘Believe me if you will, inspector ... The judge, he would never believe me ... I was sure that something had happened ...’

‘What did you think?’

‘I might as well tell you! ... I thought about the husband ... I told myself that if he’d followed her ...’

‘How did you get the letter to her?’

‘Through one of the bellboys ... He swore he’d delivered it to her personally ... But those boys lie as easily as breathing ... It’s the kind of people they mix with ... Not to mention that Clark might have found the letter ...’

‘Another thing, I don’t know if anyone saw me, but I opened almost all the doors in the basement ... True, we don’t pay much attention to each other, so it may have gone unnoticed ... I went into the locker room ...’

‘Was the door of 89 really ajar?’

‘No! I opened all the empty lockers ... Do you believe me? ... Will anyone believe me? ... No, why should they? ... That’s why I didn’t tell the truth ... I was waiting ... I was hoping they wouldn’t think of me ... It was only when I saw that I was the only one you weren’t questioning ... I’ve never suffered as much as I did that day, when you were coming and going in the basement without saying a word to me, without seeming even to look at me! ... I didn’t know what I was doing any more ... I forgot all about the instalment I was supposed to go and pay ... I turned around and went back ... Then you joined me in the Bois and I realized you were on the right track ...’

‘The next morning, Charlotte woke me up and said: “Why didn’t you tell me you’d killed her?” ...’

‘I mean, if even Charlotte ...’

It was broad daylight now, and Maigret hadn’t noticed. Buses were streaming across the bridge, taxis, delivery trucks. Paris had come back to life.

Then, after a long silence, in a less distinct voice, Prosper Donge murmured:

‘The boy doesn’t even speak French! ... I made inquiries ... Aren’t you going to see him, inspector? ...’

And, suddenly frightened:

‘Don’t tell me you’re going to just let him leave! ...’

‘Hello? ... Detective Chief Inspector Maigret? ... The chief is asking for you ...’

Maigret sighed and left his office. It was time for his report. He spent twenty minutes in the office of the commissioner of the Police Judiciaire.

When he returned, Donge was sitting leaning forwards, motionless, his arms folded on the table, his head in his arms.

Despite himself, Maigret had a brief moment of anxiety. But, when he touched the prisoner's shoulder with his finger, Donge lifted his head slowly, displaying, without false shame, his pockmarked face stained with tears.

'The examining magistrate is going to question you again in his office ... I advise you to repeat exactly what you told me ...'

An inspector was waiting at the door.

'Sorry about this ...'

Maigret took a pair of handcuffs from his pocket, and there were two clicks.

'It's the rules!' he sighed.

Then, alone in his office, he went and opened the window and breathed in the damp air. At least ten minutes went by before he opened the door to the inspectors' room.

He looked fresh as a daisy now, and said, as he usually did:

'Everything all right, boys?'



6. Charlotte's Letter

Sitting on a bench with their backs to the wall and their arms folded over their chests, the two gendarmes stretched their booted legs as far as they could, thus blocking half the corridor.

Through the door beside them came a monotonous murmur of voices. All along the corridor were other doors with benches on either side, almost all of them occupied by gendarmes, occasionally with an individual sitting handcuffed between them.

It was midday. Maigret, his pipe between his teeth, was waiting to be admitted to Judge Bonneau's office.

'What is it?' he asked one of the gendarmes, pointing to the door.

The reply was both as laconic and as eloquent as the question:

'Jeweller's in Rue Saint-Martin ...'

A young girl sat slumped on one of the benches, staring ardently at another judge's door, wiping her nose, dabbing her eyes, intertwining her fingers and pulling on them in a paroxysm of nervousness.

Monsieur Bonneau's menacing voice became more distinct. The door opened. Maigret mechanically stuffed his still-warm pipe in his pocket. The young man who came out, to be immediately seized hold of by the gendarmes, had the insolent attitude of a genuine delinquent. He turned and said ironically to the magistrate:

'Always a pleasure to see you, judge!'

Seeing Maigret, he frowned, then, as if reassured, winked at him. At that moment, the inspector's eyes turned hazy, like those of a man who vaguely

remembers something without quite being able to pin it down.

Behind the door, which had remained ajar, he heard:

‘Show the detective chief inspector in ... You may leave us, Monsieur Benoit ... I shan’t need you any more this morning ...’

Maigret entered, still with that questioning look in his eyes. What was it that had struck him about the prisoner he had seen coming out of the office?

‘Good morning, detective chief inspector ... Not too tired? ... Please sit down ... I don’t see your pipe ... You can smoke ... So, tell me about your trip to Cannes.’

Judge Bonneau was certainly not a malicious man, but he was clearly very pleased to have obtained a result without the police being involved! He was making an effort to conceal it but could not help a bright little flame dancing in his eyes.

‘Funny isn’t it, that we both found out the same things, me in Paris, without leaving my office, you on the Côte d’Azur ... What do you think of that?’

‘Yes, you’re right, it is funny ...’

Maigret was smiling like a guest being forced by his hostess to take a second helping of a dish he hates.

‘All things considered, what do you think of this case, inspector? ... This Prosper Donge? ... I have his statement here ... Apparently he simply repeated what he told you this morning ... Basically, he admits everything ...’

‘Except for the two murders,’ Maigret said in a low voice.

‘Except for the two murders, of course! That would be too much to ask! He admits he threatened his former mistress; he admits he asked her to meet him at six in the morning in the basement of the hotel, and his letter must have been quite worrying, since the poor woman ran out and bought a revolver ... But then he told us a story about a flat tyre that made him late ...’

‘It isn’t just a story ...’

‘How do you know? ... He could easily have burst his own tyre on his way to the hotel ...’

‘He didn’t ... I’ve spoken to the officer who called out to him about the tyre on the corner of Avenue Foch that morning ...’

‘A mere detail,’ the judge hastened to say, unwilling to see his house of cards come crashing down. ‘Tell me, Inspector, have you made any inquiries into

Donge's past?'

This time, the gleam was more visible in Judge Bonneau's eyes, and he could not stop himself from smoothing his beard impatiently.

'I don't suppose you had time. Well, I was curious enough about him to consult Records ... They brought down his file for me and that's how I discovered that our man, however docile in appearance, is no first offender ...'

Maigret could do nothing but assume a contrite demeanour.

'Strange isn't it?' the magistrate went on. 'We have the Records department above our heads, in the attics of the Palais de Justice, and we so often forget to make use of it! ... Look at this! At the age of sixteen, Prosper Donge, working as a washer-up in a café in Vitry-le-François, steals fifty francs from the till, runs away and is picked up on a train bound for Lyons ... Promising, isn't it? ... He narrowly avoids reformatory and is placed under special supervision for two years ...'

The strangest thing was that, all the while, Maigret was asking himself: 'Where on earth have I seen ...?'

And it wasn't Donge he was thinking about, but the young man he had passed on the way in.

'In Cannes, fifteen years later, three months' suspended sentence for grievous bodily harm and resisting arrest ... And now, inspector, it may be time for me to show you something ...'

As he said this, he held out a sheet of squared paper, the kind sold in groceries or that you find under the counter in small cafés. The text was written in purple ink, with a leaky pen, and the handwriting was that of a not very well-educated woman.

This was the notorious anonymous letter the magistrate had received and which had informed him about the relationship between Prosper and Mimi.

'This is the envelope ... As you will notice, it was posted between midnight and six in the morning in the box on Place Clichy ... Place Clichy, got that? ... Now, look at this exercise book ...'

A school exercise book, not very clean, with grease stains. It contained cooking recipes, some cut out of newspapers and stuck on, others copied down.

This time, Maigret blinked, and the judge was unable to hold back a smile of triumph.

‘You do agree it’s the same handwriting? ... I was sure of it ... Well, inspector, that exercise book was found in a kitchen cabinet I’m sure you know, in Saint-Cloud, in Prosper Donge’s house, in fact, and these recipes were copied out by a woman named Charlotte ...’

He was so pleased that he pretended to apologize.

‘I know that we and the police don’t always see eye to eye ... You people at Quai des Orfèvres have a lenient attitude towards certain people, certain irregular situations, which the magistracy finds it hard to share ... Admit, inspector, that we are not always the ones who are in the wrong ... And tell me why, if this Prosper was the good man he appears, his own mistress, this Charlotte, who also pretends to be a respectable person, would send me an anonymous letter to condemn him?’

‘I don’t know ...’

Maigret seemed to have received a knockout blow.

‘You’ll see, this investigation won’t drag on for much longer! I’ve sent Donge to the Santé prison. When you’ve given this Charlotte the third degree ... As for the second murder, it can be easily explained ... That poor night porter – Collebœuf, I think? – must have seen something of the first murder ... In any case, he knew the identity of Mrs Clark’s killer ... He couldn’t sleep all day ... I assume his scruples got the better of him in the end, and he went back to the Majestic to tell the murderer he was going to inform on him ...’

The telephone rang.

‘Hello? Yes ... I’ll be right there ...’

And, to Maigret:

‘That was my wife, reminding me we have friends over for lunch ... I’ll leave you to your investigation, inspector ... I think you now have sufficient elements to ...’

Maigret was almost at the door when he changed his mind, making a gesture as if he had finally found what he had been seeking for a long time.

‘About Fred, your honour ... It was Fred from Marseilles you were questioning when I arrived, wasn’t it?’

‘It’s the sixth time I’ve questioned him without getting the names of his accomplices ...’

‘I met Fred about three weeks ago, at Angelino’s on Place d’Italie ...’

Bonneau looked at him, clearly wondering why that mattered.

‘Angelino owns a dance hall that attracts a rather dubious clientele. A year ago he hitched up with the sister of One-Eyed Harry ...’

The magistrate still didn’t understand. And Maigret, as modest and unassuming as his massive bulk allowed, concluded:

‘One-Eyed Harry has been sentenced three times for burglary ... He’s a former stonemason who specializes in drilling through walls ...’

Finally, grabbing the door handle:

‘Didn’t the Rue Saint-Martin robbers get into the cellar by drilling through two walls? ... Good day, your honour ...’

He was in a bad mood despite everything. That letter from Charlotte ... Anyone seeing him would have sworn that it wasn’t only anger, but that he was sad.

He could have sent an inspector. But could an inspector sniff the atmosphere of a house in his place?

A vast new apartment block, luxurious, all in white, with a wrought-iron door, in Avenue de Madrid, on the edge of the Bois de Boulogne. To the right of the lobby, the glass door of the concierge’s lodge, which was a veritable salon. Three or four women sitting, shaking their heads. A tray with visiting cards. Another woman, red-eyed, who half opened the door and asked:

‘What is it?’

The door of a second room was open and you could see a body on a bed, hands together, a rosary between his fingers, two candles flickering in the half-light and some box twigs in a bowl of holy water.

People were talking in low voices, wiping their eyes, walking on tiptoe. Maigret crossed himself, sprinkled a little holy water over the dead man and stood there for a moment silently looking at the nose, which was lit strangely by the candles.

‘It’s terrible, inspector ... Such a good man, who didn’t have an enemy in the world! ...’

Above the bed, in an oval frame, an enlarged photograph of Justin Colleboeuf in a warrant officer’s uniform, at a time when he still had a big moustache.

On the frame, a military cross with three palms had been fixed, along with his medal.

‘He was a career soldier, inspector ... When he retired, he didn’t know what to do with himself and was determined to find another job ... For a while, he was a caretaker at a club on Boulevard Haussmann ... Then he was offered the post of night porter at the Majestic and he accepted ... The thing is, he was a man who needed hardly any sleep ... At the barracks, hardly a night went by without his getting up and doing a tour of inspection ...’

The women, who might have been neighbours or relatives, nodded solemnly.

‘What did he do all day long?’ Maigret asked.

‘He’d come back at a quarter past seven, just in time to take out the dustbins, because he never let me do the heavy work ... He’d smoke a pipe in the doorway, waiting for the postman, and then chat with him for a bit ... Actually, the postman had served in my husband’s regiment ... Then he’d go to bed and sleep until midday ... That was enough for him ... When he’d had lunch, he’d set off on foot across the Bois as far as the Champs-Élysées ... Sometimes, he’d go into the Majestic to say hello to his day colleague ... Then he’d have his game in the little bar in Rue de Ponthieu, and by six he’d be back here, then at seven he set off again to start work at the hotel ... It was so precisely timed that some of the neighbours set their clocks when they saw him pass by ...’

‘When did he stop wearing a moustache?’

‘He shaved it off when he left the army ... It was strange seeing him like that ... He seemed quite diminished ... He actually looked smaller ...’

Maigret stood for another moment, leaning over the dead man, then tiptoed out.

He wasn’t far from Saint-Cloud. He was impatient to go there and, at the same time, for no very clear reason, he resisted his desire. Then a taxi passed and he held his arm out. Too bad!

‘Saint-Cloud ... I’ll tell you the way ...’

It was drizzling. The sky was grey. It was only three in the afternoon, but it felt like dusk. The houses, surrounded by their bare gardens, had a desolate air.

He rang the bell. It wasn’t Charlotte, but Gigi, who opened. In the kitchen, Charlotte bent forwards to see who the visitor was.

Without a word, still contemptuous of him, Gigi stepped aside. It was only two days since Maigret had last been here and yet it seemed to him that the house had changed. Was it because Gigi had brought a little of her own mess with her? On the kitchen table, the remains of lunch were still lying around.

Gigi had put one of Charlotte's dressing gowns on over her nightdress – it was much too big for her – and on her bare feet she had a pair of Prosper's slippers. She was smoking a cigarette, half closing her eyes because of the smoke.

Charlotte had stood up but didn't know what to say. She hadn't washed or dressed. Her complexion looked muddy, and her breasts, unsupported now by any brassiere, hung wearily.

Who would be the first to speak? They looked at each other, nervous, suspicious. To hide his embarrassment, Maigret sat down and placed his bowler hat on his knees.

'I had a long conversation with Prosper this morning,' he said at last.

Charlotte perked up. 'What did he say?'

'That he didn't kill Mimi, or the night porter ...'

'Ha!' Gigi exclaimed triumphantly. 'What did I tell you?'

Charlotte wasn't sure of anything any more. She seemed all at sea. She wasn't made for drama, and she seemed constantly to be looking for something to cling on to.

'I also saw the examining magistrate. He received an anonymous letter about Prosper and Mimi ...'

No reaction. Charlotte was still looking at him curiously, her eyelids drooping, her body slack.

'An anonymous letter?'

He handed her the recipe book he had taken away with him.

'It was you who wrote in this book, wasn't it?'

'Yes ... Why? ...'

'Would you be so kind as to get a pen? ... Preferably an old pen that leaks ... Some ink ... Some paper ...'

There was a bottle of ink and a penholder on the cabinet. Gigi kept looking from Maigret to her friend, as if ready to intervene at the first sign of danger.

'Now make yourself comfortable ... Start writing ...'

'What should I write?'

‘Don’t write anything, Charlotte! You never know with these people ...’

‘Write ... You’re not running any risks, I give you my word ... “Your Honour, I’m taking the liberty of writing to you about the Donge case, which I read about in the newspapers ...”

‘Why do you spell newspapers with a double *p*?’

‘I don’t know ... What should I put?’

On the anonymous letter he had in his hand, there had been a *z* at the end of the word.

“... The American woman isn’t really American, she used to be a dancer and her name was Mimi ...”

Maigret shrugged impatiently. ‘That’ll do,’ he said. ‘Now look at this ...’

It was exactly the same handwriting. Only the spelling mistakes were different.

‘Who wrote this?’

‘That’s precisely what I’d like to know ...’

‘Did you think it was me?’

Anger was rising to her throat, and Maigret hastened to calm her.

‘I didn’t think anything ... What I came here to ask you is who, apart from you and Gigi, knew about the relationship between Prosper and Mimi, and especially about the child ...’

‘Can you think of anyone, Gigi?’

They thought about this for a while, languidly. They were living in a kind of slow motion in this untidy house which had suddenly taken on a squalid appearance. Occasionally Gigi’s nostrils quivered, and Maigret realized it wouldn’t be long before she was roaming the seediest spots in search of drugs.

‘No ... Apart from the three of us ...’

‘Who was it who received Mimi’s letter that time?’

‘I did,’ Gigi said. ‘And before I left Cannes, I found it again in a box where I keep my souvenirs ... I brought it with me ...’

‘Give it to me ...’

‘On condition you swear to me ...’

‘Of course, you fool! Don’t you see I’m trying to get Prosper out of the fix he’s in?’

He was grave, sullen. He had a vague sense of something strange and complicated in the background of this case, but he didn't as yet have the slightest clue that might serve as a point of departure.

'Will you give it back to me?'

He shrugged again and read:

My dear Gigi,

Phew! All over! It took me a while, but it's done! You and Charlotte used to laugh when I told you I'd get out of there and become a real lady.

Well, my dear, it's done ... Oswald and I got married yesterday, and it was actually a strange kind of wedding, because he wanted us to be married in England, where things aren't at all the same as they are in our country. There are even moments when I wonder if I'm really married.

Let Charlotte know. In three or four days, we're setting sail for America. Because of the strikes, we don't know the exact date we're leaving.

As for poor Prosper, I think it's best not to tell him anything. He's a good sort, but he's a bit dumb. I still wonder how I managed to stay with him for nearly a year. I must have been feeling charitable ...

All the same, without knowing it, he did me quite a favour. Keep this to yourself. It's none of Charlotte's business, she's just a sentimental fool.

I realized some time ago that I was pregnant. You can imagine how I felt at first when I found out. Before telling Oswald, I went to see a specialist ... We worked it out ... The long and short of it is, there's no way the child can be Oswald's ... Which means it's poor old Prosper who ... As long as he never finds out! He'd be quite capable of getting all paternal!

It would take too long to tell you everything ... The doctor was really nice about it ... By cheating a little bit about when the baby's due (we'll just have to claim it's a premature labour) we managed to make Oswald believe that he was going to be a daddy.

He took it really well. When you see him for the first time, you might think he's a cold fish, but he isn't at all. On the contrary, in private, he's as playful as a little boy and the other day, in Paris, we toured all the dance halls and even rode the carousel ...

Anyway, I'm now Mrs Oswald J. Clark, of Detroit, Michigan, and I'm only speaking English from now on, because Oswald, if you remember, doesn't speak a word of French.

Sometimes, I think of the two of you. Is Charlotte still as scared of putting on weight? Does she still knit in her spare time? You'll see, she'll end up behind the counter of a provincial haberdasher's!

As for you, my dearest Gigi, I don't think you'll ever become respectable. As the customer with the white spats used to say with a laugh – do you remember, the one who drank a whole bottle of champagne in one go? – you have vice in your blood!

Say hello to the Croisette for me and try not to laugh when you look at Prosper and think he's going to be a father without knowing it.

I'll send you some postcards.

Love,

MIMI.

'Do you mind if I take this letter away with me?'

It was Charlotte who intervened. 'Let him, Gigi ... The way things are right now ...'

Then, as she saw Maigret to the door:

'Tell me, do you think I could get permission to go and see him? ... He's allowed to get his meals brought in from outside, isn't he? ... Do you think you could ...?'

Turning red, she held out a thousand-franc note.

'If he could also receive a few books ... He's always spent all his spare time reading! ...'

The rain. The taxi. The streetlamps coming on. The Bois, which Maigret had crossed on a bicycle, riding in concert with Donge.

'Could you drop me at the Majestic?'

Seeing Maigret cross the lobby without a word, the porter anxiously offered his services and helped him off with his hat and coat at the cloakroom. Through the gap in the curtain, the manager had also seen him. Everybody knew Maigret. Everybody was watching him.

To the bar? Why not? He was thirsty. But he was drawn by the muted sounds of music. Somewhere in the basement, a band was playing a sluggish tango. He walked down a thickly carpeted staircase and entered a blue-lit room. Female guests were eating cakes at little tables. Others were dancing. A waiter came to greet him.

'Bring me a glass of beer ...'

'The thing is ...'

Maigret looked at him in such a way that he obeyed, scribbling something on a slip ... The slips that ... Maigret followed the peregrinations of this one with his eyes ... At the far end of the ballroom, to the right of the band, there was a kind of hatch in the wall ...

On the other side of it were the glass cages, the coffee room, the kitchens, the sinks, the couriers' room, and finally, near the clocking-in machine, the locker room with its hundred metal lockers.

Someone was watching him, he could feel it, and he spotted Zebio, who was dancing with a middle-aged woman draped in jewellery.

Was it an illusion? It seemed to Maigret that Zebio was indicating something to him with his eyes. He looked and had a little shock on seeing Oswald J. Clark

dancing with his son's governess, Ellen Darroman.

They both seemed quite indifferent to everything around them. They were in a state of rapture, like young lovers. Solemn, barely smiling, they thought themselves alone on the dance-floor, alone in the world, and when the music stopped they stood motionless for a moment before heading back to their table.

Maigret noticed then that Clark was wearing a thin strip of black cloth on the lapel of his jacket, which was his way of observing mourning.

In his pocket, Maigret's hand touched Mimi's letter to Gigi. He had an overwhelming desire to ...

But hadn't the examining magistrate forbidden him to deal directly with Clark, who was too grand a gentleman, no doubt, to be grappling with a policeman?

A slow foxtrot replaced the tango. A foamy glass of beer followed the same path the waiter's slip had followed earlier, but in the opposite direction. The couple were dancing again.

Maigret stood up, forgetting to pay for his beer, and strode back to the lobby.

'Is there someone in 203?' he asked the porter.

'I think the nurse and the boy are up there ... But ... I can phone if you like ...'

'Please don't bother ...'

'The lift is on your left, inspector.'

Too late! Maigret had already started up the marble staircase and was climbing slowly, grunting as he did so.



7. The Evening of ‘What’s He Saying?’

It was only a fleeting thought, one that Maigret forgot immediately. He reached the second floor of the Majestic and stopped for a moment to catch his breath. On the stairs, he had passed a waiter carrying a tray and a bellboy running with a bundle of foreign newspapers in his hand.

Now, straight ahead of him, some very elegant women were entering the lift, presumably on their way to the tea dance downstairs. Perfume lingered in the air.

‘They’re all in their places,’ he told himself. ‘Some behind the scenes, others in the reception rooms and the lobby ... The guests on one side, the staff on the other ...’

That wasn’t exactly his thought. Let’s see! Everyone around him was in his place, everyone was doing what he had to do. It was normal, for example, for a rich foreign lady to be taking tea, smoking cigarettes and going to fittings. It was natural for a waiter to be carrying a tray, for a chambermaid to be making the beds, for a lift operator to be working the lift ...

In short, everyone’s situation, however many of them there were, was clear, accepted once and for all.

But if anyone had asked Maigret what he was doing there, what would he have replied?

‘I’m trying to throw a man in prison, even get his head cut off ...’

It was nothing! A hesitation, probably caused by the overly, even aggressively, luxurious setting, by the atmosphere of the tea dance ...

209 ... 207 ... 205 ... 203 ... Maigret hesitated for a moment, then knocked. Leaning in towards the door, he heard the voice of a little boy saying a few

words in English, then a woman's voice coming from further away. He assumed she was asking him to come in.

He immediately crossed a little antechamber and found himself in a sitting room, of which all three windows looked out on to the Champs-Élysées. A middle-aged woman in a white nurse's uniform sat sewing by one of these windows. It was Gertrud Borms, looking even sterner because of the glasses she wore.

But she wasn't the one the inspector was interested in. He was looking at a little boy of about six, dressed in plus fours and a thick sweater that fitted his narrow chest closely. The child was sitting on the carpet, his toys strewn about him, including a big mechanical boat and model cars scrupulously imitating various makes of automobile. On his knees, a picture book, which he had been leafing through when Maigret came in and over which, after giving the visitor a mere glance, he again bent his head.

'...'

When he recounted the scene to Madame Maigret, the inspector did so more or less like this:

'She said to me something like:

"“You we you we we well ...”

'And, to gain time, I said very quickly:

"“This is Mister Oswald J. Clark's suite, isn't it? ...”"

'She said again:

"“You we you we we well,” or something close to it.

'And in the meantime, I was able to observe the boy. A head too big for his age, covered, as I'd been told, by hair of the most flaming red. The same eyes as Prosper Donge, periwinkle blue, the colour of some summer twilights ... A thin neck ...

'He looked at me and said something in English to his nurse, which as far as I was concerned also sounded like:

"“You we we you we we well ...”

'Obviously, they were both wondering what I was doing there and why I was just standing in the middle of the sitting room. Did I even know myself why I was there? There was a large Chinese vase, with flowers costing several hundred francs ...

‘The nurse finally stood up. She put her sewing down on the armchair, picked up a telephone and spoke into it.

“Do you understand any French, son?” I asked the boy.

‘He simply looked at me suspiciously. A few moments later, a hotel employee in a morning coat came in. The nurse shouted something at him. He turned to me.

“She wants to know what you want ...”

“I wanted to see Mr Clark ...”

“He isn’t here ... She says he must be downstairs ...”

“Thank you ...”

There! That was all! Maigret had wanted to see Teddy Clark and he had seen him. He went back downstairs, thinking about Prosper Donge, who was locked up in a cell in the Santé. Mechanically, without realizing it, he went all the way down to the ballroom and, as his glass of beer hadn’t yet been collected, resumed his seat.

He was in a state that he knew well. It was a bit like dozing off, although he was aware of what was going on around him, without attaching any importance to it, without trying to situate things and people in time and space.

So it was that he saw a bellboy approach Ellen Darroman and say a few words to her. She stood up and walked to a phone booth, in which she remained for only a short while.

When she came out, it was to look around until she saw Maigret. Then she rejoined Clark, to whom she said something in a low voice, still turned towards the inspector.

At that moment, Maigret had the very distinct impression that something unpleasant was about to happen. He was aware that the best thing to do was to leave and yet he stayed.

If he had had to explain why he was staying, he would have found it hard to do so. It wasn’t out of professional conscience. There was no need to linger in this ballroom, where he was out of place.

That was just it! He couldn’t have explained it to himself. Hadn’t the examining magistrate arrested Prosper Donge without consulting him? Hadn’t he even forbidden him to have any dealings with the American?

That was tantamount to saying:

‘This man doesn’t move in the same circles as you ... You can’t understand him ... Leave him to me ...’

And Maigret, plebeian to the bone, to the marrow, felt hostile to everything that surrounded him here.

Too bad! He was staying! He saw Clark, who now also sought him out with his eyes, frowned, no doubt asked his companion to remain in her place and stood up. A dance had just started. The blue lighting had been replaced by pink lighting. The American weaved his way between the couples, approached the inspector and planted himself in front of him.

For Maigret, who did not understand a word of English, his words could again be translated by:

‘Well you well we we well ...’

But this time the tone was aggressive, and it was clear that Clark could barely contain his anger.

‘What are you saying?’

And the other man really lost his temper now.

As Madame Maigret put it that evening, shaking her head:

‘Admit it, you did it on purpose! I know that look of yours! You’d drive an angel wild with rage ...’

He didn’t admit it, but there was amusement in his eyes. What had he done, when you came down to it? He had stood there facing the American, his hands in his jacket pockets, looking him in the face, as if he found it a curious sight.

Was it his fault? He was still thinking about Donge, who was in prison, not dancing with the pretty Miss Ellen. The latter, who no doubt could feel the drama coming, approached. Before she could reach them, a furious Clark had launched his fist at Maigret’s face, with that abrupt, almost automatic movement that you see in American films.

Two women who were having tea at the next table screamed and rose to their feet. A few couples stopped dancing.

As for Clark, he was pleased. It must have seemed to him that the situation had been clarified, and that there was nothing to add.

Maigret didn’t even raise his hand to his chin. The impact of fist on jaw had been clearly audible, but his face remained as impassive as if he had been given

a mere flick.

In reality, although he had not been looking for anything specific, he was really pleased with what chance had offered him, and he was smiling involuntarily at the thought of Judge Bonneau's face.

'Gentlemen! ... Gentlemen! ...'

As it looked likely that he was going to throw himself on his adversary and that a fight would start, a waiter intervened. Ellen on one side and a dancer on the other were trying to immobilize Clark, who was still speaking.

'What's he saying?' Maigret asked calmly.

'It doesn't matter! ... Gentlemen, I must ask you to ...'

And Clark was still speaking.

'What's he saying?'

Then, much to everyone's surprise, Maigret started playing absently with a shiny object he had taken from his pocket. The pretty ladies looked with astonishment at those famous handcuffs, which they had heard about but had never seen at such close quarters.

'Do you mind translating, waiter? ... Tell this gentleman that I'm obliged to arrest him for abusing an officer of the law in the exercise of his duties ... Add that if he isn't willing to come of his own free will, I'll be forced to put handcuffs on him ...'

Clark did not flinch, did not say another word and pushed Ellen away when she tried to follow him, holding on to his arm. Without asking for his coat or hat, he walked hard on Maigret's heels, and as they crossed the lobby, followed by a few onlookers, the manager, who saw them from his office, raised his arms to heaven in despair.

'Taxi ... The Palais de Justice ...'

Night had fallen. They climbed the stairs, walked along the corridors and stopped outside Judge Bonneau's door. Maigret assumed a humble, contrite attitude, one which Madame Maigret knew well and which was quite capable of driving her to distraction.

'I'm sorry, your honour ... I was obliged, much to my regret, to place Mr Clark here under arrest ...'

The judge could not have guessed the truth. He assumed that Maigret suspected the American of being the killer of his wife and the night porter.

‘Hold on a moment! Did you have a warrant? What gave you the right to ...’

It was Clark who replied, and Maigret was still unable to grasp anything of what he was saying, except a kind of onomatopoeia.

‘What’s he saying?’

Poor Judge Bonneau! He knit his brows, because his knowledge of English was poor and he was finding it hard to follow Clark. He said something in his turn, then sent his clerk to look for another clerk who sometimes served as an interpreter.

‘What’s he saying?’ Maigret murmured from time to time.

And Clark, angered even more by these words, repeated, imitating the inspector and clenching his fists:

“‘What’s he saying?’ ... ‘What’s he saying?’ ...”

Then another tirade in his own language.

The interpreter slipped into the room. He was a short, shy, bald man, of disarming humility.

‘He says he’s an American citizen and that he won’t stand for police officers ...’

The tone suggested that Clark had a deep contempt for the police!

‘... for police officers to be constantly on his tail ... He claims he’s been followed all the time by an inspector ...’

‘Is that correct, inspector?’

‘He’s probably right, your honour!’

‘He states that another officer has been following Miss Ellen ...’

‘Well, that’s quite possible ...’

‘... And that you got into his suite in his absence ...’

‘I knocked politely on the door and asked the lady who was there, as politely as possible, if I could see Mr Clark ... After which, I went down to the ballroom to have a glass of beer ... That was when the gentleman here saw fit to aim his fist at my jaw ...’

Judge Bonneau was upset. As if the case wasn’t already complicated enough! So far, they had managed to keep the press out of it, but, after the quarrel at the tea dance, reporters would be besieging the Palais de Justice and the Police Judiciaire ...

‘I don’t understand, inspector, how a man like you, with twenty-five years’ experience ...’

He almost lost his temper because, instead of listening to him, Maigret was playing with a piece of paper he had taken from his pocket. It was a letter, written on blue paper.

‘Mr Clark clearly overstepped the mark. It has to be said, though, that you didn’t demonstrate the tact one might have expected of you in circumstances which ...’

Something had clicked. Maigret was obliged to turn his head away in order not to show his joy. Sure enough, Clark had ended up hypnotized by the scrap of paper and had stepped forwards and held out his hand.

‘Please ...’

Maigret seemed surprised, and gave up the paper to the American. Understanding even less than before, the judge suspected, not without reason, some manoeuvre on the inspector’s part.

Finally Clark went up to the interpreter, showed him the letter and spoke to him volubly.

‘What’s he saying?’

‘He claims to recognize his wife’s handwriting and asks how come you’re in possession of a letter from her ...’

‘What’s this all about, Monsieur Maigret?’ Judge Bonneau asked sternly.

‘I beg your pardon, your honour ... It’s a document that’s just been given to me ... I was going to bring it to you and put it in the file ... I’m sorry that Mr Clark has got hold of it before ...’

Clark was still speaking, addressing the interpreter.

‘What’s he saying?’ the judge asked, now also affected by the contagion.

‘He’s asking me to translate this letter for him ... He says that, if we’ve taken the liberty of searching his wife’s things, he’ll complain to his embassy and that ...’

‘Translate ...’

Then Maigret, his nerves on edge, began filling a pipe. He walked to the window, beyond which the streetlamps were so many stars surrounded by a halo of dampness.

The poor interpreter, his bald pate covered in sweat, translated word for word Mimi's letter to her friend Gigi, so horrified that he kept wondering if he would have the courage to keep going. The judge had come closer in order to read over his shoulder, but Clark, more determined than ever, had pushed him away with a gesture, murmuring:

'Please ...'

It was as if he were supervising his own property, preventing anyone from taking the letter from him, trying to destroy it or skipping some sentences in the translation. He pointed at the words with his finger, demanding the exact meaning.

Quite desperate by now, Judge Bonneau joined Maigret, who was smoking with apparent indifference.

'Did you do this on purpose, inspector?'

'How was I to know that Mr Clark would punch me in the face?'

'This letter explains everything!'

'With perfect cynicism!'

Come on! The judge had put Prosper Donge in prison without being certain that he was guilty! And he had also been ready to put Charlotte, Gigi or any others of that bunch in prison with him!

Clark and the interpreter were standing, both leaning over the table, where the green lampshade drew only a circle of light.

At last Clark rose to his full height. He banged his fist on the desk and muttered something like:

'Damn!'

What happened next was very different from what might have been expected of him. He didn't become agitated. He didn't look at anybody. His features had hardened, his gaze was fixed. After a long moment of immobility, during which the poor interpreter seemed to be wanting to apologize to him, he turned, spotted a chair in a corner and went and sat down on it, so calmly, so simply that this very simplicity had something tragic about it.

Maigret, who was watching him from a distance, had literally seen beads of sweat spring up on the skin above his upper lip.

At that moment, Clark was rather like a boxer who has just received a knockout blow but remains standing by the force of inertia, instinctively looking

for support before collapsing once and for all.

Total silence reigned in the judge's office, and a typewriter could be heard clicking in a nearby office.

Clark still had not moved. Sitting in his corner, his elbows on his knees, his chin in his hands, he was looking fixedly at his feet in their square-tipped shoes.

Long after that, they heard him muttering in English:

'Well! ... Well! ...'

And Maigret asked the interpreter, under his breath:

'What's he saying?'

The interpreter translated.

Putting a brave face on things, the judge was pretending to examine some papers. The smoke from Maigret's pipe rose slowly into the air, with a tendency to spread as it reached the bright glow of the lightbulb.

'Well ...'

It came from a long way away. God knows where his thoughts were taking him. At last, he moved. Everyone wondered what he was going to do. He took a solid gold cigarette case from his pocket, opened it and extracted a cigarette. The case closed again with a snap. Then, turning to the interpreter:

'Please ...'

He wanted a match. The interpreter did not smoke. It was Maigret who held out his box and, in accepting, Clark raised his eyes towards him and gave him a long, meaningful look.

When he straightened up again, he must have felt empty, because his body was somewhat irresolute. But he was calm. His features had regained their immobility. He began by asking a question. The judge looked at Maigret as if waiting for the answer.

'He's asking if he can keep the letter.'

'I'd prefer it to be photographed first. It can be done in a few minutes. It just has to be taken upstairs to Criminal Records ...'

This was translated. Clark seemed to understand, bowed and handed the paper to the clerk, who took it away. Then he spoke again. It was nerve-racking not to understand anything. The shortest speech seemed interminable, and Maigret constantly wanted to ask:

'What's he saying?'

‘Before anything else, he wants to consult his attorney, because he was unprepared for what he has just learned, and it changes everything ...’

Why, at that moment, was Maigret moved? This tall, vigorous man who, just three days earlier, had been riding a carousel with Ellen and who, not long before, had been dancing the tango in a bluish light ... He had just received a much more direct blow than he had given the inspector ... But just like the latter, he had barely flinched ... A curse ... A fist on the table ... A few minutes’ silence ...

‘Well! ... Well! ...’

A pity they couldn’t understand each other! Maigret would have loved to have a conversation with him.

‘What’s he saying?’

‘That he’s offering a bonus of a thousand dollars to the police officer who uncovers the murderer ...’

While this was being translated, Clark looked at Maigret as if to say:

‘You see I’m a good sport ...’

‘Tell him that if we win that thousand dollars, it’ll go to the police orphanage ...’

It was strange. It was as if they were now falling over each other to be polite. Clark listened to the translation and nodded.

‘Well ...’

Then he spoke again, this time almost in the tone of a businessman.

‘He assumes – although he doesn’t want to do anything before he’s seen his attorney – that an interview between him and this man ... Prosper Donge, will be necessary ... He asks if he’ll be able to obtain permission for that and if ...’

It was now Judge Bonneau’s turn to nod solemnly. They might even have ended up congratulating one another.

‘After you ...’

‘No, please ...’

‘Not at all! ...’

Finally, Clark asked a few questions, often turning towards Maigret.

‘He’s asking, inspector, what will happen about that punch and if it will have any repercussions ... He has no idea of the consequences an act like that could have in France ... In his country ...’

‘Just tell him I have no idea what he’s talking about ...’

The judge was looking anxiously at the door. It was all too good to be true! He feared some new incident that might destroy this precious harmony. As long as the letter was brought back quickly and ...

Silence. They waited. They had nothing more to say to each other. Clark lit another cigarette, after asking Maigret for a match with a gesture.

At last, the clerk came back with his fearsome scrap of blue paper.

‘It’s done, your honour ... May I? ...’

‘Give the letter back to Mr Clark, yes ...’

Clark carefully slipped it into his wallet, put the wallet back in his inside pocket and, forgetting that he had come without a hat, looked for it on the chairs. He finally remembered, smiled mechanically and wished everyone a good evening.

Then, when the door was closed, and the interpreter had left, Judge Bonneau coughed two or three times and walked around his desk, picking up some papers he didn’t really need.

‘Hmm! ... Is this what you wanted, inspector?’

‘What do you think, your honour?’

‘I think I was the one asking the question.’

‘I beg your pardon ... Obviously! ... You see, I have the impression that Mr Clark is going to get married again quite soon ... And the child is definitely Donge’s son ...’

‘A man who’s currently in prison and who has ...’

‘... charges against him, of course!’ Maigret sighed. ‘Only, it’s his son! There’s nothing I can do about that ...’

He too looked for his hat, which he had left in the Majestic, and it struck him as quite odd to be leaving the Palais de Justice bareheaded. He was obliged to take a taxi to get back to Boulevard Richard-Lenoir.

The bruise on his chin had turned blue by now. Madame Maigret spotted it as soon as she saw him.

‘You’ve been fighting again!’ she said, laying the table. ‘And, of course, you don’t have a hat! ... Where on earth have you been? ...’

He was pleased. There was a broad smile on his face as he took his napkin out of its silver ring.



8. When Maigret Dozed Off

It wasn't at all unpleasant: nicely huddled in front of his desk, with the stove humming behind his back, on the left the window, covered with morning mist as if with muslin, in front the black marble Louis-Philippe mantelpiece, the hands of the clock stopped at twelve noon for the past twenty years; on the wall, in a black and gold frame, a group photograph of gentlemen in frock coats and top hats, with improbably large moustaches and pointed beards: the association of station secretaries, from the time when Maigret was twenty-four years old!

Four pipes arranged in order of size on the desk.

Wealthy American woman strangled in the cellars of the Majestic.

The headline was on the front page of an evening paper from the previous day. Of course, for reporters, American women are necessarily wealthy. What made Maigret smile more was his own picture in his coat and bowler hat, a pipe between his teeth, his head bent over something that could not be seen.

Chief Inspector Maigret examines the victim.

Actually, it was a photograph taken a year earlier, in the Bois de Boulogne, as he was looking at the body of a Russian who had been shot.

More important documents in manila folders.

Report of Inspector Torrence after investigation of Monsieur Edgar Fagonet, also known as Eusebio Fualdès, also known as Zebio, twenty-four years old, born in Lille.

Son of Fagonet, Albert Jean-Marie, foreman at the Lecœur factories, who died three years ago ... and of Jeanne, Albertine Octavie Hautbois, wife of the aforementioned, fifty-four years old, no profession.

The following information was supplied, partly by the concierge at 57 Rue Caulaincourt, where Edgar Fagonet lives with his mother and sister, partly by neighbours and local tradesmen

and partly, over the phone, by the police station near the gasworks in Lille.

We also got in touch by phone with the Chevalet Sanatorium in Megève and spoke personally to the manager of the Imperia cinema on Boulevard des Capucines.

Subject to further verification, the following information appears to be correct.

The Fagonet family in Lille led a respectable life and occupied a one-storey house in the new neighbourhood near the gasworks. It seems that the ambition of the parents was for Edgar Fagonet to study, and, from the age of eleven, he did in fact enter secondary school.

He soon had to leave it for a year in order to be admitted to a preventorium on the Ile d'Oléron. Having apparently recovered his health, he resumed his studies, but from then on they were constantly interrupted due to his weak constitution.

At the age of seventeen, it became necessary to send him to the mountains, where he spent four years at the Chevalet Sanatorium near Megève.

Dr Chevalet remembers Fagonet as a handsome young man who had a great deal of success with some of the female patients. He had a certain number of adventures there. It was there too that he became an accomplished dancer, because the rules of the establishment are very liberal, and the patients would seem to be generally eager for entertainment.

Declared permanently unfit for military service by the recruitment board.

At the age of twenty-one, Fagonet returns to Lille, just in time to see his father before he dies. The latter leaves him some savings, but they are insufficient to feed his family.

Fagonet's sister Émilie, then aged nineteen, suffers from a disease of the bones that makes her more or less disabled. In addition, she is of below-average intelligence and requires constant care.

It seems that at this time Edgar Fagonet makes serious efforts to find a steady job, first in Lille, then in Roubaix. Unfortunately, he is handicapped by his interrupted education. In addition, although cured, his constitution does not allow him to do manual work.

It is then that he arrives in Paris, where, a few weeks later, he is found in a sky-blue uniform, working as an usher at the Imperia cinema, which was the first to do away with usherettes and employ young men, including a certain number of poor students.

It is difficult to have precise information about this, the interested parties being rather discreet, but it appears that several of these young men, taking advantage of the uniform, made some *profitable* conquests at the Imperia.

Maigret smiled because Torrence had seen fit to underline the word *profitable* in red ink.

The fact remains that the first concern of Fagonet, whom his friends were starting to call Zebio, because of his South American appearance, was to bring his mother and sister to Paris and to install them in a three-room rented apartment in Rue Caulaincourt.

He is considered by the concierge and the neighbours as a particularly devoted son, and he is often the one who does the shopping locally in the morning.

It is through his colleagues at the Imperia that he learns, a year ago, that the Majestic is looking for a professional dancer for its ballroom. He presents himself and, after a few days' trial, is accepted. He then takes the name of Eusebio Fualdès, and the management of the hotel has no complaints about him.

In the opinion of the staff, he is a reserved, sentimental and quite timid young man. Some say: as timid as a girl.

He talks little, conserves his strength, being prone to relapses, and, on several occasions, has had to go and lie down on the bed in the basement, especially when special evenings kept him up late at night.

Although he is on good terms with everyone, he does not have any friends and is unwilling to confide in anyone.

It is assumed that his monthly income, including tips, must amount to between two thousand and two thousand five hundred francs.

That represents more or less the expenses of the household in Rue Caulaincourt.

Edgar Fagonet does not drink, smokes little and does not take any drugs. His bad state of health would prevent him.

His mother is a Northern woman, short and strong. She has spoken several times – to the concierge among others – of working for herself, but having to look after her daughter has always prevented her.

We have tried to find out if Fagonet has ever spent time on the Côte d'Azur. We have no specific information about this. Some claim he spent a few days there three or four years ago, when he was still at the Imperia, in the company of a middle-aged lady. This information is, however, too vague to be taken as established fact.

Maigret slowly filled pipe number three, stoked the stove, went to the window for a brief glance at the Seine, which was just starting to be gilded by a pale sun, then came back and sat down with a contented sigh.

Report of Inspector Lucas regarding Ramuel, Jean Oscar Aldebert, forty-eight years old, living in rented accommodation at 14 Rue Delambre in the fourteenth arrondissement.

Ramuel was born in Nice to a French father, now deceased, and an Italian mother, whom we have been unable to trace and who seems to have long ago returned to her country. His father worked as a shipper of fruit and vegetables.

At the age of eighteen, Jean Ramuel is a clerk for a contractor at Les Halles in Paris, but we have been unable to gather specific information about this, because this contractor died ten years ago.

At the age of nineteen, he volunteers for the army. At twenty-four, he leaves the army with the rank of sergeant-major and enters the service of an unofficial broker, but quits almost immediately to work as an assistant bookkeeper in a sugar refinery in Egypt.

He remains there for three years, before returning to France, where he has a number of jobs in the business district in Paris, and tries his hand at playing the Stock Exchange.

At the age of thirty-two, he sets sail for Guayaquil in the Republic of Ecuador, to work for an Anglo-French mining company. His job is to revise the company's bookkeeping system, which has apparently become quite muddled.

He is away for six years. It is there that he makes the acquaintance of Marie Deligeard, on whom we have little information, and who, in all likelihood, had exercised a none too respectable profession in South America.

He comes back with her. The head office of the company having been transferred to London, we lack information about this period.

For a time, the couple live a life of ease in Toulon, Cassis and Marseilles. Ramuel tries to deal in land and villas, but has little success.

Marie Deligeard, whom he introduces as Madame Ramuel, even though they are not married, is a loud, vulgar woman who does not hesitate to cause scenes in public places and takes a

wicked pleasure in being noticed.

There are numerous quarrels between them. Occasionally Ramuel leaves his companion for several days; but she is always the one who has the last word.

Ramuel and Marie Delageard surface again in Paris, in a fairly comfortable rented apartment in Rue Delambre: a bedroom, a kitchen, a bathroom and an entrance hall, for a rent of eight hundred francs per month.

Ramuel is hired as an accountant at the Atoum Bank in Rue Caumartin. (This bank is currently bankrupt, although Atoum has opened a carpet shop in Rue des Saints-Pères under the name of one of his employees.)

It is just before this bankruptcy that Ramuel leaves the bank and, almost immediately, after reading a small ad, he applies to the Majestic as a bookkeeper.

He has been there for three years. The management has no complaints about him. The staff do not like him, because he is excessively strict.

On several occasions, during his quarrels with his companion, he has stayed at the hotel for several days, sleeping on a makeshift bed. Almost always, he has received telephone calls from her, or else the woman has come to the basement in person.

He is the laughing stock of the staff, because he seems to be genuinely terrified of her.

It should be noted that yesterday Jean Ramuel returned to his conjugal life at the apartment in Rue Delambre.

A quarter of an hour later, the old clerk knocked softly at Maigret's door. Not receiving any answer, he opened the door noiselessly and tiptoed in.

Sitting back in his armchair, his waistcoat unbuttoned, an extinguished pipe in his mouth, the inspector seemed to be asleep.

The usher was about to cough to inform him of his presence when Maigret murmured, without opening his eyes:

‘What is it?’

‘A gentlemen asking to see you ... Here's his card.’

It was as if Maigret was still reluctant to shake off his drowsiness, and it was with his eyes still closed that he held out his hand. At last, he sighed, put the visiting card down next to him and simultaneously picked up the telephone.

‘Shall I send him in?’

‘Not just yet ...’

He had barely glanced at the card:

Étienne Jolivet, assistant manager, Crédit Lyonnais, O. branch.

‘Hello? ... Could you ask Judge Bonneau if he'd be so kind as to give me the name and address of Mr Clark's attorney ... Attorney, that's right ... Then get the attorney on the phone for me ... It's urgent ...’

For more than a quarter of an hour, Monsieur Jolivet, dressed to the nines in striped trousers, a black jacket with edging and a hat as stiff as reinforced concrete, sat with great dignity on the edge of his chair in the dreary waiting room of the Police Judiciaire. As companions, he had a fierce-looking young man and a prostitute who kept telling her story in a rasping voice:

‘First of all, how could I have taken his wallet without his noticing? ... These men from the provinces, they’re all the same ... They don’t dare admit to their wives what they’ve spent in Paris, so they claim they’ve been robbed ... Luckily the head of Vice knows me ... That proves I ...’

‘Hello? ... Monsieur Herbert Davidson? ... How do you do, Monsieur Herbert Davidson. Detective Chief Inspector Maigret here ... Yes ... I had the pleasure of meeting your client Mr Clark yesterday ... He was very pleasant ... What’s that you say? ... No, no, not at all! ... I don’t remember any of that ... I’m phoning you because I had the impression he was willing to help us in so far as he could ... You say he’s with you right now? ...’

‘Then ask him ... Hello? ... I know that in the circles he moves in, especially in the United States, the life of each member of a married couple is quite distinct ... Nevertheless, he might have noticed ... Don’t hang up ... Wait, Mr Davidson ... You can translate afterwards ... It’s been established that Mrs Clark received at least three letters from Paris in the course of the last few years ... I’d like to know if Mr Clark saw them ... I’d especially like to know if she received any more letters of the same kind ... Yes ... I’ll wait ... Thank you ...’

He heard a murmur of voices at the other end of the line.

‘Hello? ... What’s that you say? ... He didn’t open them? ... He didn’t ask his wife what was in them! ... Of course! ... That’s a concept ...’

He would have liked to see Madame Maigret receiving letters without showing them to him!

‘About one every three months? ... Always the same handwriting? ... Yes ... Postmarked Paris? ... Wait, Mr Davidson ...’

He went to open the door of the inspectors’ office, because they were creating a commotion.

‘Shut up in there!’

Then he came back.

‘Hello? ... Quite large sums? ... Would you be so kind, Mr Davidson, as to make a note of these statements in writing and transmit them to the examining magistrate? ... No, still nothing! ... I’m sorry about that ... I really don’t know how the newspapers found out, but I can assure you it was nothing to do with me ... Even this morning, I sent away four reporters and two photographers who were waiting for me in the corridor of the Police Judiciaire. Please give my regards to Mr Clark ...’

He frowned. Opening the door to the inspectors’ office just now, hadn’t he thought he recognized ...? He opened it again and there, sure enough, sitting on the table, was a reporter, accompanied by his photographer.

‘Listen, my friend ... I think I just shouted loudly enough for you to have heard ... If a single word of what I said appears in your rag, I’ll cut off all information to you from now on ... Understood?’

All the same, as he returned to his office and called for the clerk, he had a vague smile on his lips.

‘Bring in Monsieur ... Monsieur Jolivet ...’

‘Good day, sir ... I’m sorry to disturb you ... I thought it was best ... Reading last night’s newspaper ...’

‘Please sit down ...’

‘Actually, I must confess, I’m not doing this of my own accord, but in agreement with our managing director, whom I telephoned first thing this morning ... The reason the name Prosper Donge struck me is that I’d seen it only recently ... What you need to know is that in the O. branch, I’m the person who looks at the cheques ... A mechanical task, of course, since the client’s account has been verified previously ... I take a look ... I stamp the cheque ... All the same, as this was a large sum ...’

‘Hold on a moment ... Are you telling me Prosper Donge was a customer of yours?’

‘For the past five years, inspector. And even longer, since his account was transferred to us at that point by our branch in Cannes ...’

‘Allow me to ask the questions ... In that way, it’ll be easier for me to get my thoughts in some kind of order ... Prosper Donge was a customer of your branch in Cannes ... Can you tell me how large his account was at that time?’

‘A very modest account, like that of most of the hotel employees we have as customers ... It should be noted, though, that as they don’t pay for board and lodgings, they can put aside most of their income, if they’re serious about it ... That was certainly the case with Donge, who paid between a thousand and fifteen hundred francs into his account every month ...

‘In addition, a bond he’d had us buy for him had just come due at twenty thousand francs ... In short, he had about fifty-five thousand francs when he arrived in Paris ...’

‘And did he continue to make small deposits?’

‘Wait! I’ve brought with me a summary of his transactions. You’ll see there’s something quite troubling ... First year ... Donge, who’s living in furnished rooms in Rue Brey, near the Étoile, still pays in about twelve thousand francs ...

‘The second year, he makes withdrawals but no deposits. His address changes. He’s living in Saint-Cloud now, where, if I’ve understood from the cheques he drew, he’s had a house built ... Cheques to the property agent, the carpenter, the painters, the building firm ...

‘So that by the end of that year, as you can see from this summary, all he has left in the bank is eight hundred and thirty-three francs and a few centimes ...

‘Then, three years ago, in other words, just a few months later ...’

‘Excuse me! You did say *three years ago* ...’

‘That’s right ... I’ll give you the exact dates in a moment ... Three years ago, he informs us by letter that he has moved and asks us to take note of his new address: 117c Rue Réaumur ...’

‘Just a moment ... Have you ever seen Donge in person?’

‘I may have seen him, but I don’t remember ... I’m not at the counter, I have a private office where I only see the public through a kind of spyhole ...’

‘Have your staff seen him?’

‘I asked several members of staff this morning ... One of them remembers him well, for the simple reason that he’s also had a house built in the suburbs ... He told me Donge even remarked that he’d left it almost as soon as it was built ...’

‘Could you get this employee on the phone?’

Maigret took advantage of the phone call to stretch like a man who is collapsing with tiredness, but there was a gleam in his eyes.

‘So, you were saying ... Let’s see! ... Donge moves house to 117c Rue Réaumur ... Will you excuse me a moment? ...’

He vanished into the inspectors’ office.

‘Lucas ... Get a taxi ... 117c Rue Réaumur ... Find out what you can about Monsieur Prosper Donge ... I’ll explain later ...’

He came back to his deputy branch manager.

‘What are Donge’s transactions from that point?’

‘That’s what I came here to tell you about. I was astonished when I examined his account this morning, and even more astonished when I discovered his latest transaction ... The first American cheque ...’

‘Excuse me. What did you say?’

‘Oh, there are several! ... The first American cheque, drawn on a bank in Detroit and made out to Prosper Donge, dates from March, again three years ago, and is for five hundred dollars ... I can tell you exactly how much that was at the time ...’

‘Never mind! ...’

‘The cheque was paid into his account. Six months later, another cheque for the same amount was sent to us by Donge with a request to cash it and credit him with that amount ...’

The deputy manager suddenly became alarmed at the inspector’s beatific expression. Maigret seemed to have stopped listening to him. In fact, it was as if Maigret’s mind had gone blank. It had suddenly occurred to him that if he hadn’t phoned the attorney before receiving this visitor, if he hadn’t asked some specific questions on the telephone, they could always claim that it was mere chance that ...

‘I’m listening, Monsieur ... Monsieur Jolivet, isn’t it? ...’

Each time, he was obliged to glance at the visiting card.

‘Or rather, I already know what you’re going to tell me. Donge has continued to receive cheques from Detroit, at the rate of about one every three months ...’

‘That’s right ... But ...’

‘These cheques added together amount to about how much?’

‘Three hundred thousand francs ...’

‘Which has remained in the bank without Donge ever making a withdrawal?’

‘That’s right ... For the past eight months, though, there haven’t been any more cheques ...’

Of course! Before coming to France, hadn’t Mrs Clark been on a Pacific cruise with her son?

‘During that time, has Donge continued to deposit small sums every month?’

‘I can’t find any trace of them on his account ... Obviously, any such deposits would have been derisory compared with those cheques from America ... But I’m just getting to the most troubling part ... The letter from the day before yesterday ... I’m not the one who dealt with it ... That was the head of the foreign service, you’ll understand why ... Anyway, the day before yesterday, we received a letter from Donge ... Instead of containing a cheque as usual, it asked if we could send him one, payable to bearer, to be presented at a bank in Brussels ... It’s a common transaction ... People who travel often ask us to issue a cheque to them, payable at another bank, which avoids the complication of a letter of credit and also avoids them having to take large sums with them in cash ...’

‘How much was the cheque for?’

‘Two hundred and eighty thousand French francs ... Almost the whole of the account ... In fact, all that’s left to Donge’s credit is less than twenty thousand francs ...’

‘In other words, you issued the cheque?’

‘We sent it to the address requested ...’

‘Which was?’

‘Monsieur Prosper Donge, 117c Rue Réaumur, as usual ...’

‘And it had gone out by yesterday morning?’

‘Most likely, yes ... But in that case, Donge can’t have it in his possession ...’ The deputy manager brandished the newspaper. ‘He can’t have it, since, the day before yesterday, more or less at the same time we were drawing up the cheque, Prosper Donge was arrested!’

Maigret rapidly leafed through the telephone directory, discovered that 117c Rue Réaumur, where there were lots of numbers, had a phone in the concierge’s lodge. He called. Lucas had been on the premises for several minutes.

He gave him brief instructions.

‘A letter, yes, addressed to Donge ... The envelope bears the heading of the Crédit Lyonnais, O. branch ... Be quick about it ... Call me back ...’

‘I think, inspector,’ the deputy manager said, with some solemnity, ‘that I did well to ...’

‘Oh, yes! ... Oh yes! ...’

Except that he’d stopped seeing the fellow. He was no longer bothered with him. He was far away. God alone knew exactly where. He felt the need to move objects about, to stoke the stove, to come and go.

‘There’s an employee from the Crédit Lyonnais here, sir ...’

‘Send him in ...’

At the same moment, the telephone rang. The employee stood stock still in the doorway in an expectant attitude, looking fearfully at his deputy manager and wondering what he could have done to be summoned to police headquarters.

‘Lucas?’

‘Get this, boss, the building where I am isn’t a residential building. There are only offices, most of them just one room. Some are rented by provincial tradesmen who consider it an advantage to have an address in Paris. There are some who never set foot here, and their post is forwarded to them. In others, all you find is a typist to answer the phone ... Hello? ...’

‘Carry on!’

‘Three years ago, Donge had an office here for two months, paying six hundred francs a month in rent ... He only came two or three times ... Since then, he’s been sending the concierge a hundred francs a month to have his mail forwarded to him ...’

‘Forwarded where? ...’

‘Jem Private Post, 42 Boulevard Haussmann ...’

‘In what name?’

‘The envelopes are already typed up ... Donge sends them in advance ... Wait ... It isn’t very bright in the lodge ... Yes, let’s have some light, please ... Here we are ... J. M. D., Jem Private Post, 42 Boulevard Haussmann ... That’s all ... You know private postal services are the only ones to accept initials ...’

‘Have you kept your taxi? ... No? ... Idiot! ... Get another one ... What time is it? ... Eleven o’clock? ... Get over to Haussmann ... Did the concierge forward a letter yesterday morning? ... Yes? ... Hurry up, then ...’

He had forgotten all about the two men, who did not know how to act and were listening to him with a certain astonishment. His mind had gone such a

distance that he almost asked them:

‘What are you two doing there?’

Then all at once he calmed down.

‘What do you do at the bank?’ he asked the employee, who jumped.

‘I’m in the current account service.’

‘Do you know Prosper Donge?’

‘Yes, I do ... I mean I’ve seen him several times ... The thing is, at the time he was having a house built in the suburbs and so was I ... Only, I’d chosen a plot with ...’

‘I know ... Anyway ...’

‘He would come from time to time to withdraw little sums for those suppliers who didn’t have bank accounts and wouldn’t accept cheques ... He found it a chore ... I remember we talked about that ... That everyone should have a bank account, like they do in America ... It was difficult for him to come, because his work kept him at the Majestic from six in the morning to six in the evening and, at that hour, the bank was closed ... I told him ... The deputy manager won’t hold it against me, because we do it for some customers ... I told him that he only had to give me a call and I’d send him the money with the receipt to sign ... Two or three times, I also sent him money at the Majestic ...’

‘Have you seen him again since?’

‘I don’t think so ... Mind you, for two summers running, I was sent to manage the branch in Étretat ... He may have come then ...’

Maigret abruptly opened a drawer of his desk, took out a photograph of Donge and placed it on the desk without saying a word.

‘That’s him!’ the employee cried. ‘He has a fairly recognizable face. Apparently – or so he told me – he had smallpox when he was a child, and the farmers he was living with didn’t even send for the doctor ...’

‘Are you sure it’s him?’

‘As sure as I am that I’m me!’

‘And would you recognize his handwriting?’

‘I’d recognize it myself,’ the deputy manager cut in, annoyed to be relegated to the background.

Maigret handed them various papers, written by different people.

‘No! ... No! ... That’s not like it ... Ah! ... Wait! ... That’s one of his 7s ... He had a particular way of doing the 7s ... The *fs* too ... This is one of his *fs* ...’

What they had just pointed out was indeed from the hand of Donge, since it was one of the slips he scribbled on when he received orders for so many coffees with or without croissants, so many teas, slices of toast or hot chocolates.

The telephone was silent. It was just after midday.

‘It only remains, gentlemen, for me to thank you!’

What could Lucas possibly be doing at the Jem agency all this time? He was quite capable of having taken the bus, just to save six francs!



9. Monsieur Charles' Newspaper

Taken separately, they might still have passed. But together, standing near the entrance to the Police Judiciaire, as if waiting outside a factory, they formed a grotesque, pitiful duo. Gigi perched on her thin legs, dressed in her worn rabbitskin coat, bright-eyed, looking defiantly at the officer on duty at the door, leaning over whenever she heard footsteps to see who was coming; poor Charlotte who hadn't summoned up the will to arrange her hair, or to put on make-up, and whose broad, moonlike face was streaked with red because she had been crying and was still snivelling. Her nose, also red, was like a small ball in the middle of her face.

She was wearing a very dignified black linen coat trimmed with astrakhan at the collar and hem and mechanically holding a comfortable glazed calfskin handbag. Without the presence of the long, crow-like Gigi, and without that little red nose in the middle of her face, she would have looked quite respectable.

'It's him! ...'

Charlotte hadn't moved. It was Gigi, who was constantly coming and going. And Maigret had indeed arrived, in the company of a colleague. He noticed the two women too late. There was sunlight on the riverbank, a little foretaste of spring in the air.

'Excuse me, inspector ...'

He shook his colleague's hand. 'Enjoy your meal ...'

'Could we have a word, inspector? ...'

And Charlotte burst into sobs, stuffing almost all her handkerchief, rolled into a ball, into her mouth. Passers-by turned round. Maigret waited patiently. As if to

excuse her friend, Gigi said:

‘She’s just come from seeing the judge. He summoned her ...’

‘Oh, yes, Judge Bonneau! It was his right, of course! But all the same ...’

‘Is it true, inspector, that Prosper ... confessed everything? ...’

This time, Maigret openly smiled. Was that all the examining magistrate had come up with? That old ploy used by all rookie police officers? And that silly goose Charlotte had fallen for it!

‘It isn’t true, is it? I thought as much! If only you knew everything he came out with! ... To hear him, I’m the lowest of the low ...’

The officer on duty in front of the entrance raised an eyebrow as he looked at them. And it was indeed a curious sight, Maigret having to deal with the two women, the one crying and the other eyeing him with unconcealed suspicion!

‘As if I’d write an anonymous letter accusing Prosper, when I’m sure he didn’t kill anyone! ... You see, if it had been with a revolver, I might still believe it ... But not strangle someone ... And especially not do the same thing the next day to a poor man who hadn’t done anything ... What about you? Have you found out anything new, inspector? Do you think they’re going to keep him in prison? ...’

Maigret signalled to a taxi that was prowling.

‘Get in!’ he said to the two women. ‘I have an errand to perform, you can come with me ...’

It was true. He had finally received a phone call from Lucas, who hadn’t got anything from the Jem agency. He had arranged to meet him on Boulevard Haussmann. And the idea had just crossed his mind that ...

Both women wanted to sit on the jump seat, but he forced them to occupy the back seat, while he was the one who turned his back on the driver. It was one of the first fine days of the year. The streets of Paris sped by, looking spick and span, and the passers-by were more animated.

‘Tell me, Charlotte, does Donge still put his savings in the bank? ...’

He almost laid into Gigi, who frowned every time he opened his mouth, as if suspecting a trap. It was obvious she was having to restrain herself from telling her friend:

‘Careful! ... Think before you answer ...’

Charlotte, meanwhile, exclaimed:

‘Savings, poor thing? ... It’s a long time since we last managed to make any savings! ... Especially since we’ve had this house on our backs! ... According to the estimates, it was supposed to cost no more than forty thousand francs ... First of all, the foundations cost three times what we’d planned, because they discovered an underground stream ... Then, when the walls started to go up, there was a building strike that stopped the works just before winter set in ... Five thousand francs here ... Three thousand francs there ... A gang of thieves, really! ... If I told you how much the house all adds up to now! ... I don’t know the exact figure, but it’s surely more than eighty thousand, and there are things that haven’t been paid yet ...’

‘So Donge has no more money in the bank?’

‘He hasn’t even had an account ... wait! ... for about three years ... I remember, because one day the postman came with a money order for eight hundred and something francs ... I didn’t know what it was ... When Donge came home, he told me he’d written to the bank to close his account and ask for the balance ...’

‘Would you happen to remember the date?’

‘What business is it of yours?’ Gigi asked, unable to stop herself adding her dose of vinegar.

‘I know it was winter, because I was busy breaking up the ice around the pump when the postman arrived ... Wait ... I went to the market in Saint-Cloud that day ... I bought a goose ... So it must have been a few days before Christmas ...’

‘Where are we going?’ Gigi muttered, looking through the window.

Just then, the taxi stopped on Boulevard Haussmann, just before Faubourg Saint-Honoré. Lucas was on the pavement, and his eyes opened wide when he saw Maigret get out after the two women.

‘One moment ...’ the inspector said to them.

He pulled Lucas aside.

‘Well?’

‘Look ... You see that sort of narrow shop, between the luggage seller and the ladies’ hairdresser? ... That’s the Jem agency ... It’s run by a repulsive old character I couldn’t get anything out of ... He wanted to close his shop and go

and have lunch, claiming it was his usual time ... I forced him to stay open ... He's really angry ... He claims I don't have the right without a warrant ...'

Maigret entered the barely lit shop, cut in half by a black wooden counter. Little wooden pigeonholes, also black, adorned the walls, filled with letters.

'I'd like to know ...' the old man began.

'If you don't mind,' Maigret growled, 'I'll ask the questions. It's true, isn't it, that you receive letters with initials, which is forbidden at the *poste restante*? I guess that means you must have quite an interesting clientele ...'

'I pay my licence!' was the old man's only response.

He wore thick glasses beneath which lurked a pair of watery eyes. His jacket was dirty, his shirt collar frayed and greasy. A rancid odour came off his body and became the odour of the shop.

'I need to know if you keep a register in which you note down the names of your customers opposite the initials ...'

The old man sniggered. 'You think they'd still come here if they had to give their names? ... Might as well ask them for identity cards ...'

It was a little sickening to think that pretty women slipped furtively into this shop which had served as an agency for so many adulteries and so many other dubious transactions.

'Yesterday morning you received a letter addressed to the initials J. M. D. ...'

'That's quite possible. I already told your colleague. He even insisted on making sure the letter wasn't here any more ...'

'So someone came to collect it. Can you tell me when?'

'I have absolutely no idea and, even if I knew, I don't think I'd tell you ...'

'You do know, don't you, that one of these days I might have your shop closed down?'

'There are others who've told me the same thing, and my shop, as you call it, has been here for forty-two years ... If I kept count of all the husbands who've come here, kicking up a fuss and even threatening me with their sticks ...'

Lucas hadn't been wrong to say that the man was repulsive.

'Now if you don't mind, I'm going to close the shutters and go to lunch ...'

Where could this creep have lunch? Was it possible that he had a family, a wife, children? He was much more likely to be a bachelor and probably had his

place reserved for him, with his napkin in a ring, in some seedy restaurant in the neighbourhood.

‘Have you ever seen this man?’

Unfazed, Maigret once again held out the photograph of Donge, and curiosity won out over the old man’s ill humour. He leaned forwards and had to bring the paper up to less than twenty centimetres from his face. His features didn’t move. He shrugged his shoulders.

‘Never seen him before ...’ he murmured, as if regretfully.

The two women had remained outside, in front of the narrow window. Maigret called Charlotte in.

‘What about this woman, do you recognize her?’

If Charlotte was acting, she was startlingly good, because she looked about her with a mixture of surprise and embarrassment, two feelings these premises were well placed to inspire.

‘What ...?’ she began.

She was panicking. She was wondering why she had been brought here. She looked instinctively for help from Gigi, who had come in of her own accord.

‘Are you going to bring many more people in here?’

‘Don’t you recognize either of them? ... Can’t you tell me if it was a man or a woman who asked for the letter addressed to J. M. D., or when that letter was collected? ...’

Without answering, the old man had taken hold of a wooden shutter which he went and hung in front of the door. There was nothing to do except retreat. Maigret, Lucas and the two women found themselves back on the pavement, beneath the chestnut trees, whose buds would soon be bursting.

‘You can go, you two! ...’

He watched them walk away. Gigi hadn’t gone ten metres before she started speaking vehemently to her companion, whom she was pulling along with her at a pace which the plump Charlotte had difficulty keeping up with.

‘Anything new, boss?’

What could Maigret have replied? He was anxious and tetchy. It was as if the spring weather, instead of cheering him up, were making him more irritable.

‘I don’t know ... Listen ... Go and have lunch ... This afternoon, don’t leave the office ... Inform the banks, both in France and in Brussels, that if a cheque

for two hundred and eighty thousand francs is presented ...’

He wasn’t far from the Majestic. He turned on to Rue de Ponthieu and entered the bistro next to the hotel’s service entrance. You could have a snack there, and he ordered a *cassoulet*, which he ate alone, still sullen, at a little table at the back, not far from two customers who were having a quick lunch before going to the races and were talking about horses.

Anyone following him would have found it difficult to say what he did that afternoon. When his meal was over, he had a coffee and bought some tobacco, which he stuffed into his pouch. Then he left the bistro and stood for a while on the pavement, looking around.

He clearly didn’t have a firm plan. It was with a sluggish gait that he entered the corridor of the Majestic and came to a halt by the clocking-in machine. He was like a traveller with hours to wait in a station fiddling with the automatic sweet dispensers.

People passed behind him, especially cooks, napkins around their necks, running to knock back a quick drink at the bistro next door.

As he advanced into the corridor, the heat became heavier and he received blasts of air from the kitchen in his face.

Nobody in the locker room. He washed his hands at the basin, for no reason, just to kill time, and spent a good ten minutes cleaning his nails. Then, as it was too hot, he took off his coat and hung it in locker number 89.

Jean Ramuel sat enthroned in his glass cage. Opposite, in the coffee room, the three women were bustling about at an accelerated pace, along with a new employee in a white coat who was filling in for Prosper.

‘Who’s that?’ Maigret asked Ramuel.

‘An assistant they’ve hired until they find someone ... Monsieur Charles, they call him ... So, inspector, you’ve come for a little stroll, have you? ... Do you mind? ...’

It was the lunch rush. Rich customers have lunch late, and the slips were piling up in front of Ramuel, the waiters parading past, the telephones ringing all at once, the dumb waiters working without respite.

Maigret, who had kept his hat on his head, came and went, his hands in his pockets, stopping behind a cook who was stirring a sauce as if it interested him

enormously, then standing by the sinks, or with his face up against the windows of the couriers' room.

As he had done during his first inspection, he set off up the service staircase and this time climbed all the floors, without hurrying, as surly as ever. As he was coming back down, he was joined by the manager, who was out of breath.

'They've only just told me you're here, inspector ... I assume you haven't had lunch yet? ... If you'll allow me ...'

'I've eaten, thanks ...'

'Then may I ask you if you have any news? I was so upset when they arrested that Prosper Donge ... But are you sure you won't have anything? ... A little *brandy*, at least? ...'

More than anything else, the manager was embarrassed to find himself sharing a narrow staircase with a Maigret who manifested no feeling. At such moments, the inspector had the inertia of a pachyderm.

'I had hoped that the press wouldn't get hold of this business ... You know how much, for a hotel ... As for Donge ...'

It was hopeless. Maigret was offering nothing to cling on to. He had started walking down the stairs and found himself again in the basement.

'A young man I would have cited as a model only a few days ago ... Because, as I'm sure you can imagine, in a place like this we get all sorts ...'

Maigret's gaze went from one partition to another, from one fish tank to another, as he put it. And it ended up in the locker room, in the now infamous locker 89, where two human lives had really come to an end.

'As for that poor Collebœuf ... Forgive me if I'm boring you ... I just thought of something ... Don't you think it must take above-average strength to strangle a man in broad daylight, a few metres away from lots of other people, in other words without the victim being able to cry out or struggle? ... At an hour like now, it might still be possible, because everyone's very busy and there's a lot of noise ... But about half past four or five in the afternoon ...'

'I assume you were eating?' Maigret murmured.

'It doesn't matter ... We're used to eating at odd times ...'

'Do me a favour and finish your lunch ... I'm just coming and going ... Excuse me ...'

And once again he walked along corridors, opened doors, closed them again, lit a pipe, which he soon let go out.

His steps took him back most often to the coffee room, and he was starting to know all the moves of its occupants. He kept muttering between his teeth, unconnected phrases such as:

‘OK ... So Donge is here ... He’s here every day, from six in the morning ... OK ... At home, he had a cup of coffee that Charlotte heated for him when she got back ... OK ... Here, I suppose he pours himself one of the first cups from the percolator ... OK ...’

Did it make any sense?

‘He’s in the habit of taking a cup of coffee to the night porter ... OK ... Actually, that day, it must have been because it was after ten past six and Donge hadn’t yet gone up that Justin Collebœuf came downstairs ... OK ... Well ... Because of that or for some other reason ... Hmm!’

Actually, it wasn’t the same silver coffee pots as at breakfast that were being filled now, but little coffee pots of glazed earthenware, each surmounted by a tiny filter.

‘All morning, the breakfasts follow each other at an ever faster pace ... OK! ... Then Donge has a bite to eat ... A meal that’s brought to him on a tray ...’

‘Would you mind moving a little to your right or your left, inspector? ... You’re stopping me from counting the cups ...’

That was Ramuel, who was supposed to keep an eye on everything from his glass cage. Well, well! He also counted the cups in the coffee room.

‘Sorry to have to ask you that ...’

‘Not at all! Not at all! ...’

Three o’clock. The pace was slowing. One of the chefs had just got dressed to go outside.

‘If anyone asks for me, Ramuel, I’ll be back about five ... I have to go and pay my taxes.’

The little brown coffee pots had almost all come back down. Monsieur Charles left the coffee room and turned into the passage that led to the street, not without casting a curious look at the inspector. The women must have told him who he was.

He came back a few moments later with an afternoon paper. It was just after three. The women were at the sinks, up to their elbows in hot water.

As for Monsieur Charles, he sat down at his little table, as comfortably as he could. He spread out the newspaper in front of him, put on a pair of glasses, lit a cigarette and began to read.

There was nothing remarkable about this, and yet Maigret opened his eyes wide.

‘So,’ he said, smiling at Ramuel who was sorting his slips, ‘this is the break?’

‘Just until half past four, when things start up again with the tea dance ...’

A few more minutes went by, and Maigret still hadn’t left his corridor. Suddenly, a bell rang in the coffee room, Monsieur Charles stood up, uttered a few words into the phone, reluctantly put down his newspaper and set off towards distant corridors.

‘Where is he going?’

‘What time is it? Half past three? It must be the purchasing manager calling him to collect the supplies of coffee and tea.’

‘Is it like this every day?’

‘Every day ...’

Ramuel watched as Maigret, calm as ever, walked into the coffee room. What he did next was quite banal. All he did, in fact, was open the drawer in the table, which was a common white wooden table. In it he found a small bottle of ink, a penholder and a box of writing paper. There were also some pencil ends and two or three money order forms.

He was closing the drawer again when Monsieur Charles came back, carrying some packages. Seeing Maigret leaning over the table, Monsieur Charles misunderstood.

‘You can take it ...’ he said, referring to the newspaper. ‘Not that there’s much in it! ... I only ever read the serial and the small ads.’

That was what it was all about!

‘There! ... Prosper Donge is sitting calmly at this table ... The three women next door are bustling about in the steam by the sinks ... He ...’

In an instant, Maigret lost his heaviness, his sleepy demeanour. It was as if he had suddenly remembered that he had an urgent job to do. Without saying goodbye to anyone, he walked rapidly towards the locker room, grabbed his

coat, put it on as he walked and a moment later collapsed on to the back seat of a taxi.

‘To the financial section of the prosecutor’s office!’ he cried to the driver.

A quarter to four. Would he still find anybody there? If all went well, it was possible that by evening ...

He turned. The taxi had just passed Edgar Fagonet, known as Zebio, walking in the direction of the Majestic.



10. Dinner at the Coupole

The operation was carried out with such deliberate force that even the old antique dealer, who was slowly mouldering away deep in his lightless shop, shuffled across the wooden floor to the door.

It was just before six. The drab shops in Rue des Saints-Pères were dimly lit, and purple light still lay across the street.

The car from the Préfecture of Police emerged from the street along the river, its horn blowing loudly enough to make all the antique dealers and second-hand booksellers jump inside their shops.

Then, in a screech of brakes, it stopped at the edge of the kerb, and three men jumped out, looking resolute, as if answering an emergency call.

Maigret headed for the door just as the pale, frightened face of the assistant stuck itself up against the glass like a transfer. One of the two inspectors entered the alleyway to make sure the shop had no other way out; the other one, who had remained on the pavement, was almost a caricature of an inspector, with his thick moustache and his dark, suspicious eyes, whom Maigret had chosen quite deliberately.

In the shop, its walls hung with oriental rugs, its atmosphere one of muffled calm, the assistant was trying to get over his fright.

‘Do you want to see Monsieur Atoum? ... I’ll check if he’s here ...’

But Maigret had already brushed the fellow aside. He had spotted a kind of crack in the carpets at the back, a redder light, and he could hear a murmur of voices. He soon found himself on the threshold of a small room which looked as if it was formed of four rugs, its only furniture a divan with multicoloured

leather cushions and a round table inlaid with mother-of-pearl on which a cup of Turkish coffee stood steaming.

A man stood there, getting ready to leave, clearly just as nervous as the assistant. Another man sat on the divan, smoking a gold-tipped cigarette and saying something in a foreign language.

‘Monsieur Atoum, isn’t it? ... Detective Chief Inspector Maigret of the Police Judiciaire ...’

The visitor left even more hastily than planned, and the front door could be heard closing behind him. Maigret sat down calmly on the edge of the divan and looked curiously at the little Turkish coffee cups.

‘Don’t you recognize me, Monsieur Atoum? ... We spent half a day together ... When was it? ... Oh, yes, nearly eight years ago now ... A nice trip! The Vosges, Alsace! ... If I remember correctly, we parted company near a border post ...’

Atoum was fat, but had a youthful face and wonderful eyes. Dressed with studied elegance, scented, his fingers adorned with rings, he squatted rather than sat on the divan. The little room, illumined by a fake alabaster lamp, was more like something from an Eastern bazaar than a Parisian scene.

‘What was it you had done that time? ... Not much, if I remember correctly ... Only, as your papers weren’t in order, the French government preferred to pay for you to take that trip to the border ... Actually, you came back that same evening, but nobody lost face, and I think you found people to pull strings for you ...’

Atoum, who was as calm as ever, confronted Maigret with the stillness of a cat.

‘After that, you became a banker, because in France a clean record isn’t required of those who handle other people’s money ... Then you got into trouble again, Monsieur Atoum ...’

‘Do you mind my asking, inspector ...’

‘What I’m doing here? Well, to be honest, I’m still not sure. I have a car and men at the door. We may all leave together ...’

Atoum’s hand did not shake as he lit another cigarette, after a gesture towards Maigret, who refused.

‘I may also just go quietly on my way and leave you here ...’

‘And what will that depend on?’

‘On the answer you’re going to give to a small question ... I know how discreet you are, so I’ve taken a few precautions against your discretion, as you can see! ... When you were a banker, you had a bookkeeper who was your right arm, your trusted associate – notice I don’t say your accomplice – whose name was Jean Ramuel ... Well, I’d like to know why you parted company with such a valuable assistant, why, to be more precise, you threw him out ...’

A fairly long silence. Atoum was thinking.

‘You’re mistaken, inspector ... I didn’t throw him out. He left of his own free will, for health reasons, if I remember correctly ...’

Maigret stood up. ‘Too bad! In that case, it’s the first option ... If you’d like to follow me, Monsieur Atoum ...’

‘Where are you planning to take me?’

‘To the border, once again ...’

A slight smile hovered over Atoum’s lips.

‘Only this time, it’ll be a different border ... You know, I quite fancy a trip to Italy ... I’ve been told you left Italy in a hurry, forgetting to serve a five-year sentence for fraud and passing bad cheques ... Which means ...’

‘Sit down, inspector ...’

‘Are you telling me I won’t have to get up again in a moment?’

‘What do you want to do with Ramuel?’

‘Maybe put him in his place, what do you think?’

And, abruptly changing tone:

‘Come on, Atoum! I have no time to waste today ... I suspect Ramuel has a hold on you! ...’

‘I admit that if he talked out of turn he could cause me a lot of problems. The affairs of a bank are complex. He was in the habit of sticking his nose into everything ... I wonder if it mightn’t be better for me to choose Italy ... Unless you can give me certain assurances ... For example, that if he talked about certain things, you wouldn’t take any notice, given that it’s the past and I’ve become an honest shopkeeper since then ...’

‘It’s within the realm of possibilities ...’

‘In that case, I can tell you that Ramuel and I parted company after a somewhat heated argument ... What happened was that I’d discovered that he

was working in my bank for his own benefit and that he'd made a number of forgeries ...'

'I assume you've kept these documents?'

Atoum blinked and admitted in a low voice:

'But he'd kept others, which means ...'

'Which means you both have a hold on each other ... Well, Atoum, I need you to hand those documents over to me immediately ...'

The man hesitated a while longer. An Italian prison or a French prison? He finally stood up. Behind the divan, he lifted the curtain, revealing a little safe built into the wall, which he opened.

'These are drafts on which Ramuel imitated, not only my signature, but those of two of my customers ... If, when you search his place, you find a little red notebook in which I noted down various transactions, I'd be grateful if you ...'

And as he crossed the shop behind Maigret, he pointed to a magnificent Karamani carpet and after a brief hesitation murmured:

'I wonder if Madame Maigret would like that design ...'

It was half past eight when Maigret walked into the Coupole and headed straight for the area of the vast room where people were dining. He was alone, with his bowler hat pushed back on his head and his hands in his pockets, as usual. His one concern seemed to be to find a free seat.

Suddenly, he spotted a short man sitting over a plate of cold meats and a glass of beer.

'There you are, Lucas ... Is that seat free?'

He sat down, like a man pleased to be having a good dinner, then stood up again to entrust his overcoat to the bellboy. Beside him, an aggressively vulgar woman sitting over a decent-sized half-lobster was crying in an unpleasant voice:

'Waiter! ... Bring me a different mayonnaise ... This one smells of soap ...'

Maigret turned to her, then to the man sitting next to her, and seemed genuinely surprised.

'Well, well! Monsieur Ramuel ... We seem to keep meeting! Would you be so kind as to introduce me? ...'

'My wife ... Detective Chief Inspector Maigret, of the Police Judiciaire ...'

‘Pleased to meet you, inspector ...’

‘A steak and fries and a large beer, waiter!’

His gaze came to rest on Ramuel’s plate, which contained noodles without butter and without cheese.

‘Do you know what I think?’ he said suddenly in a cordial tone. ‘I think, Monsieur Ramuel, that you’ve always been unlucky ... It struck me the first time I saw you ... There are people like that, who never succeed at anything, and I’ve noticed that they’re also the ones who end up with the most unpleasant diseases and infirmities ...’

‘He’s going to use what you say to excuse how difficult he is!’ Marie Deligeard cut in, sniffing the new mayonnaise she had just been brought.

‘Intelligent, well educated, hard working as you are,’ Maigret went on, ‘you ought to have made your fortune ten times over ... And the strangest thing is that on several occasions you really did come close to finding a wonderful position for yourself ... In Cairo, to start with ... Then in Ecuador ... Each time, after a rapid rise, you find yourself falling as low as before ... You land an excellent job in a bank? ... As luck would have it, the banker you get involved with, a man named Atoum, turns out to be crooked, and you’re obliged to leave him ...’

Around them, the diners were far from suspecting the repercussions of this conversation. Maigret was affecting a light, companionable tone, tucking into his steak with gusto, while Lucas kept his head bowed over his plate and Ramuel seemed very preoccupied with his noodles.

‘The fact is, I really wasn’t expecting to find you here on Boulevard Montparnasse. I thought you’d be on the train to Brussels by now ...’

Ramuel didn’t flinch, but his complexion became yellower, and his fingers tensed on his fork. It was his companion who exclaimed:

‘What’s this? ... You were planning to go to Brussels and you didn’t tell me? ... What does that mean, Jean? ... Another woman, eh?’

‘I can assure you, madame,’ Maigret said good-naturedly, ‘that it’s nothing to do with a woman ... No need to worry about that! ... But your husband ... I mean your friend ...’

‘You can say my husband ... I don’t know what he told you about that, but we’re properly married ... Here’s the proof ...’

She searched feverishly in her bag and took out a torn, yellowed paper folded very small.

‘Look! ... This is our marriage certificate ...’

It was all written in Spanish, and there were lots of stamps and seals from the Republic of Ecuador.

‘Answer me, Jean! ... What were you planning to do in Brussels?’

‘But ... I never had any intention ...’

‘Come now, Monsieur Ramuel ... I’m sorry ... I didn’t mean to cause a domestic quarrel ... When I found out you’d withdrawn almost all your money from the bank and that you had asked for a cheque for two hundred and eighty thousand francs, to be cashed in Brussels ...’

Maigret hastened to put some of the perfectly crisp fries in his mouth because he had a terrible desire to smile. Sure enough, a foot had come to rest on his own, Ramuel’s foot in fact – his way of begging him to keep quiet.

It was too late. Forgetting her lobster, forgetting the dozens of people having dinner around them, Marie Deligeard, or rather Marie Ramuel, if the paper was to be believed, flew off the handle.

‘You did say two hundred and eighty thousand francs? ... So he had two hundred and eighty thousand francs in the bank and he refused me the bare necessities? ...’

Maigret glanced at the lobster and the twenty-five-franc half-bottle of Riesling.

‘Answer me, Jean! ... Is it true? ...’

‘I have absolutely no idea what the inspector’s talking about ...’

‘Do you have a bank account?’

‘I swear I don’t have a bank account, and that if I had two hundred and eighty thousand francs ...’

‘And you, inspector, what do you say?’

‘I’m sorry, madame, to put you in this state. I thought you knew everything, that your husband never hid anything from you ...’

‘I understand now!’

‘What do you understand?’

‘The way he’s been behaving lately ... He’s been too meek ... Too submissive ... I knew it wasn’t natural ... Obviously, he was getting ready to pull that trick

on me!’

Neighbours turned with a smile, because these words could be heard from up to three tables away.

‘Marie! ...’ Ramuel implored.

‘So you were secretly feathering your nest, depriving me of everything, while getting ready to run off and leave me ... One fine day, he’d just slip away! ... I’d be left all alone in an apartment where the rent probably hadn’t even been paid! ... Oh, no, my friend! ... You tried to shake me off twice before, but you know perfectly well you didn’t get away with it ... Are you sure there isn’t a woman mixed up in all this, inspector? ...’

‘Tell me, inspector, don’t you think it might be better to continue this conversation elsewhere? ...’

‘No, not at all!’ Maigret sighed. ‘As matter of fact, I’d quite like ... Waiter! ...’

He pointed to the silver trolley with its convex lid, which was being pushed between the tables.

‘What do you have there?’

‘Rib of beef ...’

‘Well, then, give me a slice ... Some rib of beef, Lucas? ... And fries, waiter! ...’

‘Take this lobster away, it isn’t fresh!’ Ramuel’s companion cut in. ‘Give me the same thing the inspector is having ... So, that bastard put money aside and ...’

She was so upset, she was forced to redo her make-up, shaking a powder puff of a dubious pink colour over the table.

And under the table there were some unexpected movements: Ramuel giving her little kicks to silence her, and she refusing to listen to reason and responding with angry prods of her heels.

‘You’ll pay for this, you crook! ... Just you wait ...’

‘This can all be cleared up soon enough, you’ll see ... I don’t know why the inspector thinks ...’

‘Are you sure you’re not making a mistake? ... Because we know what you police are like ... When you don’t know anything and you’re floundering, you make up all kinds of things to take people for a ride ... Is that what this is?’

Maigret looked at the time. It was half past nine. He gave a little wink to Lucas, who felt the need to cough. Then finally he leaned over towards Ramuel and his companion as if to tell them something in confidence.

‘Don’t move, Ramuel ... Don’t make a scene, it’d be pointless ... The man on your right is one of ours ... As for Sergeant Lucas, he’s been following you since this afternoon and he’s the one who phoned me to say you were here ...’

‘What does this all mean?’ Marie Deligeard stammered.

‘It means, madame, that I wanted to let you eat first ... I’m obliged to place your husband under arrest ... We’re going to do this nicely, it’ll be better for everybody ... Finish your dinner ... In a while, we’ll leave here together, like good friends ... We’ll find a taxi and take a trip to Quai des Orfèvres ... You have no idea how quiet the offices are at night ... Some mustard, waiter! ... And some gherkins, if you have them ...’

A big line furrowing her forehead, which did nothing to make her prettier or more enticing, Marie Deligeard ate fiercely, occasionally throwing her husband a withering look. Maigret asked for a third beer, leaned again towards Ramuel and said conspiratorially:

‘It just so happens that at about four o’clock this afternoon, I suddenly remembered that you’d been a sergeant-major ...’

‘You always told me you were a second lieutenant!’ Marie squealed, determined never to miss an opportunity.

‘It’s already quite something, madame, to be a sergeant-major! ... It’s the sergeant-major who does all the writing for the company ... In fact, I remembered my own military service, which was a long time ago, as you can imagine ...’

Nothing could stop him from savouring his fries, which were really sensational, crisp on the outside and tender on the inside.

‘As our captain came to the barracks as seldom as possible, it was the sergeant-major who signed the furloughs, in fact most of the documents, in the captain’s name, of course ... And the signature was so well imitated that the captain himself couldn’t tell what he had signed from what the sergeant-major had done ... What do you have to say about that, Ramuel?’

‘I don’t understand ... And, as I assume you’re not planning to arrest me without a proper warrant, I’d like to know ...’

‘Actually I do have a warrant, from the financial section of the prosecutor’s office ... That surprises you, doesn’t it? ... And yet it happens often ... You’re dealing with one case ... Without intending to, you discover another case, which dates back several years, and which everyone thought had been forgotten ... I have in my pocket certain drafts given to me by a man named Atoum ... Aren’t you eating any more? ... No dessert, madame? ... Waiter! ... We are each paying separately, aren’t we? ... What do I owe you, waiter? ... I had a steak and something from the trolley, rib of beef it was, plus three portions of fries and three beers ... Do you have a light, Lucas?’



11. Gala Evening at the Police Judiciaire

The still dark entrance, then the vast staircase, with a measly lightbulb every now and again, and finally the immense corridor with its many doors.

Amiably, Maigret said to Marie Deligeard, who was out of breath:

‘We’re here, madame ... Do catch your breath ...’

A single light was on in the corridor and two men were walking up and down it with large strides, deep in conversation: Oswald J. Clark and his lawyer.

At the end of the corridor, the waiting room, one side of which was of glass, allowing police officers to come and look at their visitors in certain circumstances. A table with a green cloth.

Green velvet armchairs. Over the mantelpiece, a Louis-Philippe clock just like the one in Maigret’s office and not working any better than that. On the walls, black frames containing the photographs of police officers who had fallen in the line of duty.

On the armchairs in a shadowy corner, two women, Charlotte and Gigi.

In the corridor itself, on a bench, Prosper Donge, still without tie or shoelaces, sitting between two gendarmes.

‘This way, Ramuel! ... Come into my office ... You, madame, if you don’t mind, please stay in the waiting room for a moment ... Will you show her the way, Lucas? ...’

He opened his door, smiling at the thought of the three women alone together in the waiting room, the anxious or venomous glances they must be exchanging.

‘Come in, Ramuel! ... You might as well take your coat off, I think we’re going to be here for a while ...’

A lamp with a green shade on the table. Maigret took off his hat and coat, chose a pipe from the desk and opened the door to the inspectors' room.

It was as if the whole of the Police Judiciaire, usually so empty during the night, had been made to look jam-packed for the occasion. Torrence was sitting on the desk, a soft hat on his head. He was smoking a cigarette and, in front of him, on a chair, a little old man with a filthy beard was staring at his elasticated shoes.

Janvier was still there, taking advantage of the opportunity to bring his report up to date, and keeping an eye on a middle-aged man who looked like a former NCO.

'Are you the concierge?' Maigret asked him. 'Would you come in here a moment, please?'

He stood aside to let him in. The man had his cap in his hand and at first did not see Ramuel, who was standing as far as possible from the light.

'You're the concierge at 117c Rue Réaumur, aren't you? ... A while back, a man named Prosper Donge rented one of your offices, and since then you've been forwarding his letters ... Look ... Do you recognize Donge?'

The concierge turned to the corner where Ramuel was standing, shook his head and muttered:

'Um ... Er ... To be honest ... No, I can't say for sure! ... So many people come by! ... And it was more than three years ago, wasn't it? ... I might be wrong, but I vaguely remember that he had a beard ... And with a beard, well, it might have been someone else ...'

'I'm grateful to you ... You can go ... This way ...'

One down! Maigret opened the door again, called:

'Monsieur Jem, or whatever your name is ... Please come in ... And tell me ...'

This time, there was no need to wait for the answer. Seeing Ramuel, the little old man had given a start.

'Well?'

'Well what?'

'Do you recognize him?'

The old man exploded. 'I'll have to appear in court, won't I? They'll let me stew for two or three days in the witness room and, while I'm doing that, who'll

mind the store? ... Then, when I'm on the stand, they'll ask me a whole lot of embarrassing questions, and the lawyers will say all kinds of things about me to blacken my name ... Thanks a lot, inspector!'

Then suddenly:

'What has he done?'

'Well, among other things, he killed two people, a man and a woman ... The woman was a rich American ...'

'Is there a reward?'

'Quite a big one, yes ...'

'In that case, you can write ... I, Jean-Baptiste Isaac Meyer, tradesman ... Are there many witnesses to share the reward? ... Because I know how things are ... The police make lots of promises ... Then when ...'

'I'm writing: "... formally identify the person introduced to me as Jean Ramuel as the individual who subscribes to my private postal service under the initials J. M. D. ..." Is that right, Monsieur Meyer?'

'Where should I sign?'

'Wait! Let me add: "... And I state that this individual came and collected a final letter on the ..." Now, you can sign ... You're a clever one, Monsieur Meyer, because, as I'm sure you know, this case will be good publicity for you, and all those who didn't yet know about private post will come rushing to see you ... Torrence! ... Monsieur Meyer can go ...'

Once the door was closed again, Maigret reread the repulsive fellow's statement with satisfaction. A voice made him jump. It came from the semi-darkness, because only the lamp on the desk was lit.

'I protest, inspector, at ...'

Then, all at once, Maigret appeared to recall something he had forgotten. He began by lowering the ecru blind in front of the window. Then he looked at his hands. It was a Maigret whom few people knew and those who did rarely boasted of it.

'Come here, Ramuel ... I said come here! ... Closer! ... Don't be afraid! ...'

'What are you ...?'

'You know something? Ever since I learned the truth, I've had a real yearning to ...'

Instantly, Maigret's fist flew and landed on the nose of the bookkeeper, who had raised his arms too late.

'There! ... It isn't exactly standard procedure, I know, but it feels good ... Tomorrow, the judge will question you politely, and everyone will be kind to you, because you're going to become a star of the courtrooms ... And those gentlemen are always impressed by stars ... Do you understand? ... There's water in the drinking fountain, behind the cupboard door ... Wash yourself, you look a mess ...'

Bleeding profusely, Ramuel cleaned up his face as best he could.

'May I see? ... That's better! ... You're almost presentable! ... Torrence! ... Lucas! ... Janvier! ... Go ahead, boys ... Bring the ladies and gentlemen in ...'

His colleagues themselves were surprised, because he was much more overexcited than usual, even at the end of a difficult investigation. He had lit another pipe. The first person who came in, between two gendarmes, was Donge, holding his handcuffed hands clumsily in front of him.

'Do you have the key?' Maigret asked one of the gendarmes.

He sprang the lock, and a moment later the handcuffs clicked shut around Ramuel's wrists, while Donge looked at the bookkeeper with an almost comical astonishment.

Then Maigret noticed that Donge had neither tie nor shoelaces, and he ordered Ramuel's laces and little black silk bow tie to be taken off.

'Please come in, ladies ... Come in, Mr Clark ... Oh, of course, you don't understand ... I'm sure Mr Davidson will translate for you ... Are there enough chairs for everybody? ... Oh, yes, Charlotte, you can sit next to Prosper ... Only, I ask you to avoid getting too emotional for the moment ...

'Is everybody here? ... Close the door, Torrence! ...'

'What has he done?' Madame Ramuel asked in her rasping voice.

'You sit down too, madame! ... I hate talking to people when they're standing ... No, Lucas! ... Don't bother to switch on the ceiling light ... It's more intimate this way ... What has he done? ... The same thing he's been doing all his life: *making forgeries* ... And I'd wager that the only reason he married you and spent so many years with a horror like you, with all due respect, is because you had a hold on him ... And you had a hold on him because you knew about

his trickery in Guayaquil ... A cable has been sent there, and another one to the head office of the company in London. I'm sure I know the answer already ...'

The voice of the awful Marie rang out:

'Why don't you say anything, Jean? ... It's true, isn't it, the two hundred and eighty thousand francs and the trip to Brussels? ...'

She had leaped up like a jack in the box and rushed to him.

'Swine! ... Thief! ... Crook! ... When I think ...'

'Calm down, madame ... It's a lot better that he didn't tell you anything, because otherwise I'd be obliged to arrest you as an accomplice, not only to forgery, but to a double murder ...'

From that moment on, there was an almost comical note. Clark, who hadn't taken his eyes off Maigret, kept leaning towards his attorney and saying a few words in English. Each time, the inspector threw him a glance and he was convinced that the only thing the American was saying in his language was:

'What's he saying?'

'As for you, my poor Charlotte,' Maigret went on, 'I have to admit to you something that Prosper may have admitted to you the last evening he spent with you ... When, thinking he had got over her, you told him about Mimi's letter and about the child, he hadn't got over her at all ... He didn't say anything, but there in his coffee room, at about three o'clock, during the break, as Ramuel calls it, he didn't hesitate to write a long letter to his former lover ...'

'Don't you remember, Donge? ... Don't you recall any details?'

Donge was no longer sure of anything. He didn't understand what was going on and looked around him with his big blue-green eyes.

'I don't know what you mean, inspector ...'

'How many letters did you write?'

'Three ...'

'And, at least one of the three times, weren't you disturbed by a phone call? ... Weren't you called to the purchasing manager's office to collect the next day's supplies? ...'

'It's possible ... Yes ... In fact it's quite likely ...'

'And your letter was still on your table, just opposite Ramuel's cage ... Ramuel the unlucky! ... Ramuel who's been a forger all his life without ever making a fortune ... Who did you ask to post your letters?'

‘The bellboy ... He’d take them up to the lobby, where there’s a postbox.’

‘Which means that Ramuel could easily intercept them ... And that Mimi ... I’m sorry, Mr Clark ... To us, she’s still Mimi ... Let’s say that Mrs Clark, in Detroit, after receiving letters from a man in love, in which he mostly talked about his son, received other letters, threatening letters, in the same handwriting and also signed Donge ... Only, these demanded money ... The new Donge wanted to be paid for his silence ...’

‘Inspector! ...’ Prosper exclaimed.

‘Just keep quiet, you! ... And try to understand, for heaven’s sake! ... Because it was a clever piece of work, you must believe that ... And it proves yet again that Ramuel has never had any luck ... He first had to write to Mimi that you had changed address, which was easy, given that in your letters you hadn’t been very forthcoming about your new life ... Then there was that office rented in Rue Réaumur in the name of Prosper Donge ...’

‘But ...’

‘To rent an office, you don’t need any proof of identity and you’re given whatever mail arrives in your name ... Unfortunately, the cheque that Mimi sends is made out to Prosper Donge, and banks do require the papers to be in order ...

‘I repeat that Ramuel is an artist in his field ... Only, to realize that, it’s necessary to know that you had between half an hour and three-quarters of an hour of calm in the coffee room, just opposite his glass cage, before his very eyes, so to speak, and that you took advantage of that break to catch up with your mail ...

‘Now all at once you write a letter to your bank in order to close your account and ask that the balance be sent to you in Saint-Cloud ...

‘But that wasn’t the letter that reached the Crédit Lyonnais. It was another one, written by Ramuel, still in your handwriting, a simple change of address ... From now on, all mail for Donge was to be sent to 117c Rue Réaumur ...

‘The cheque is sent ... It’s paid into the account ... As for the eight hundred and something francs you receive in Saint-Cloud, it’s Ramuel who sends it to you in the post in the name of the bank.

‘A nasty trick, but a cleverly contrived one, as you can see! ...

‘So cleverly that Ramuel doesn’t trust that address in Rue Réaumur and, taking caution to extremes, has his mail forwarded to a postbox ...

‘That way, who will ever be able to trace him?

‘But suddenly the unexpected happens ... Mimi’s in France ... Mimi’s staying at the Majestic ... At any moment, Donge, the real Donge, could meet her, tell her he never blackmailed her, and ...’

Charlotte couldn’t contain herself any longer. She started crying, without knowing quite why, as she would have cried reading a sad novel or watching a sentimental film.

‘Shut up! ... Shut up! ...’ Gigi whispered in her ear.

And no doubt Clark was still murmuring to his attorney:

‘What’s he saying?’

‘As for Mrs Clark’s death,’ Maigret continued, ‘it was accidental ... Ramuel, who had access to the hotel register, knew she was staying at the Majestic ... Donge had no idea ... He learned it by chance from a conversation he overheard in the couriers’ room ...

‘He wrote ... He fixed a meeting for six in the morning and no doubt he was going to demand his son, to weep, to beg ... I’m sure that, if they had met, Mimi would have bamboozled him once again ...

‘He doesn’t suspect that because she thinks she’s dealing with a blackmailer she’s bought a revolver ...

‘Ramuel is worried ... He doesn’t leave the cellars of the Majestic. He hasn’t noticed that little note Donge sent through one of the bellboys ...

‘And that’s all! ... A flat tyre ... Donge arriving a quarter of an hour late ... Ramuel seeing the young woman wandering in the corridors of the basement and, suspecting what has happened, foreseeing that everything will be discovered ...

‘He strangles her ... He pushes her into a locker ...

‘Soon, he realizes that everything will point to Donge, whereas nobody would think of suspecting him ...

‘To be absolutely sure, he writes an anonymous letter, in Charlotte’s handwriting ... Because there are several notes from Charlotte in the drawer of the coffee room ...

‘He’s an artist, I repeat! A miniaturist ... Always with a finishing touch! ... And when he realizes that poor Justin Collebœuf saw him ... When Collebœuf comes and tells him that in all conscience he thinks he’s obliged to report him to the law, there’s another murder, an easy one, and easily pinned on Donge ...

‘That’s all ... Torrence! ... Give this scum a wet towel, his nose is starting to bleed ... He slipped earlier and banged his face on the corner of the table ...

‘Do you have anything to say, Ramuel?’

Silence. Only the American was still asking:

‘What’s he saying?’

‘As for you, madame ... What should we call you? ... Marie Deligeard? ... Madame Ramuel? ...’

‘I prefer Marie Deligeard ...’

‘That’s what I thought ... You weren’t wrong in thinking that he was hoping to leave you soon ... No doubt he was waiting until he had a tidy enough sum in the bank ... He could have gone abroad by himself to have his liver treated, a long way from your screeching ...’

‘Hold on a minute!’

‘With all due respect, madame! ... With all due respect! ...’

And suddenly:

‘Gendarmes! ... Take the prisoner to the cells ... I hope that tomorrow Judge Bonneau will be so kind as to sign a final warrant and that ...’

Gigi was standing in a corner, perched on her long legs, the tension doubtless giving her such a strong need for drugs that she was dizzy and her nostrils were quivering like a wounded bird.

‘Excuse me, inspector ...’

It was the attorney. Clark was standing behind him.

‘My client would like to speak with you and Monsieur Donge in my office, as soon as possible, about ... about the child who ...’

‘Do you hear, Prosper?’ Gigi cried triumphantly from her corner.

‘Would tomorrow morning be all right? ... Are you free tomorrow morning, Monsieur Donge? ...’

But Donge was unable to respond. He had suddenly melted. He had thrown himself on Charlotte’s opulent chest and was weeping – weeping, as they say,

every tear he had in his body – while, somewhat embarrassed, she calmed him like a child.

‘It’s all right, Prosper! ... We’ll bring him up together! ... We’ll teach him French! ... We’ll ...’

Maigret, for some reason, opened almost all the drawers in his desk. He remembered that in one of them he had stuffed some little sachets seized during a recent raid. He took one, hesitated, shrugged his shoulders.

Then, as Gigi was almost fainting, he walked over to her. His hand brushed hers.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, it’s one o’clock in the morning ... So if you don’t mind ...’

‘What’s he saying?’ Clark seemed to be asking again, bemused by his first contact with the French police.

It was discovered the following morning that the cheque for two hundred and eighty thousand francs had been presented at the Société Générale in Brussels by a man named Jaminet, a bookmaker by profession.

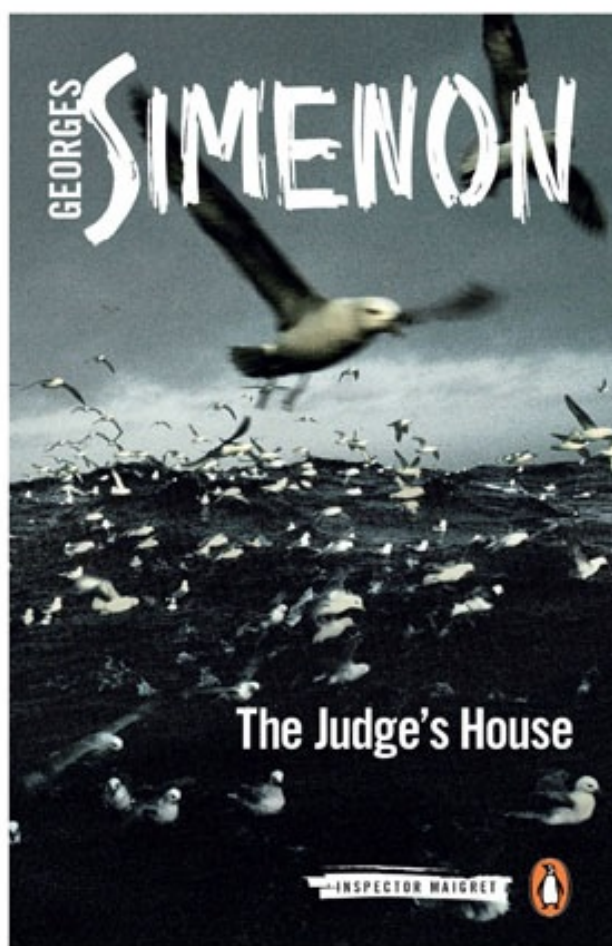
Jaminet had received it by air mail from Ramuel, under whom he had previously served as a corporal during his military service.

Which did not prevent Ramuel from denying everything to the end.

And from finally having some luck, since his bad state of health – he fainted three times during the final hearing – meant that his death sentence was commuted to hard labour for life.



**READ ON FOR AN EXTRACT FROM THE
NEXT INSPECTOR MAIGRET NOVEL**



**INSPECTOR
MAIGRET**



1. The Custom's Officer's Wife

'Fifty-six, fifty-seven, fifty-eight ...' Maigret counted.

He didn't want to count. It was mechanical. His head was empty, his eyelids heavy.

'Sixty-one, sixty-two ...'

He glanced outside. The bottom halves of the windows in the Café Français were frosted. Above the frosted section, all you could see were the bare trees on the square and the rain, the never-ending rain.

'Eighty-three, eighty-four ...'

He was standing there, his billiard cue in his hand, and he could see himself in the mirrors that covered the walls of the café.

And Monsieur Le Flem, the owner, carried on playing, never saying a word, quite relaxed, as if this was all perfectly natural. He would go from one side of the green baize to the other, bend down then straighten up again, watching the movement of the balls with a distant look in his eyes.

'A hundred and twenty-two ... A hundred and twenty-three ...'

The room was vast. Near the window, the maid, a middle-aged woman, was sewing. That was all. Nothing but the three of them! With a cat sitting by the stove.

And it was only three o'clock! And it was only 13 January. Maigret could see the figure on a big calendar hanging behind the cash register. And it had been like this for three months! And ...

He hadn't complained to anybody. Even Madame Maigret didn't know why he had fallen into disgrace and been transferred to Luçon. This was the hidden face

of the profession, of no concern to those outside.

Madame Maigret was here, too, in an apartment they had rented above a piano shop, and they had already had some brushes with the landlord because ... Well, never mind!

‘How many points is that?’ Monsieur Le Flem asked, not sure when to stop.

‘A hundred and fifty ...’

Maigret puffed gently at his pipe. Come on! A hundred and forty-seven, a hundred and forty-eight, a hundred and forty-nine, a hundred and fifty! The balls froze on the billiard table, the whites a nasty yellow, the red an unhealthy pink. The cues were placed back in their rack. Monsieur Le Flem went to the beer pump and poured two glasses, taking the heads off them with the help of a wooden knife.

‘Cheers.’

What else could they have said to each other?

‘It’s still raining ...’

Maigret put on his overcoat, placed his bowler hat well forward on his head and, a few moments later, his hands in his pockets, was walking along the streets of the town in the falling rain.

He opened the door to his office, its walls covered with administrative posters. His nose puckered at the smell of Inspector Méjat’s brilliantine, a sickly odour that even ten pipes could not have overcome.

An old lady in a bonnet, with a shrivelled face, was sitting there on a chair, holding a huge dripping umbrella, of the kind common in the Vendée, in front of her. There was already a long trail of water on the floor, as if a dog had been caught short.

‘What is it?’ Maigret asked, walking through the barrier and leaning down towards his one inspector.

‘It’s for you. She only wants to talk to you.’

‘What do you mean, to me? Did she say my name?’

‘She asked for Detective Chief Inspector Maigret.’

The old woman realized they were talking about her and pursed her lips in a dignified manner. Before taking his coat off, Maigret, out of habit, fiddled with some of the papers awaiting him on his desk: the usual routine, a few Poles to keep an eye on, missing identity cards, rescindments of residence permits ...

‘I’m listening, madame. Please stay where you are. But before we start, I have a question for you: who told you my name?’

‘My husband, inspector ... Justin Hulot ... When you see him, you’re bound to remember him, he has the kind of face you can’t forget. He was a customs officer in Concarneau when you were there on a case. He read in the paper that you’d been appointed to Luçon ... Yesterday, when he realized the body was still in the room, he told me ...’

‘Excuse me! What body is this we’re talking about?’

‘The one in the judge’s house.’

Clearly a woman who wouldn’t be easily intimidated! For the moment, Maigret was looking at her without a great deal of interest, not suspecting that this sixty-four-year-old woman he had before him, Adine Hulot, would soon become much more familiar to him and that, like everyone else, he would end up calling her Didine.

‘First of all, I should tell you that my husband has retired and that we’ve moved to the village I come from, L’Aiguillon ... I have a little house there, near the harbour, which I inherited from my late uncle ... I don’t suppose you know L’Aiguillon?’

‘That’s what I thought. In that case, it won’t be easy for you to understand ... But who else could I turn to? Not the local policeman, who’s drunk all day long and can’t be bothered ... The mayor’s only interested in his mussels ...’

‘His mussels?’ Maigret echoed.

‘He’s a mussel farmer, like my late uncle, like almost everybody in L’Aiguillon. He breeds mussels ...’

That idiot Inspector Méjat saw fit to laugh sarcastically at this, and Maigret threw him an icy glance.

‘You were saying, madame ...’

She didn’t need any encouragement. She was taking her time. She, too, had underlined with a glance the inappropriateness of Méjat’s laughter.

‘There are no stupid professions.’

‘Of course not! Please go on.’

‘The village of L’Aiguillon is quite far from the harbour. Not many people live there, only about twenty. The largest house is the judge’s ...’

‘One moment. Who is this judge?’

‘Forlacroix, his name is. He used to be a justice of the peace in Versailles. I think he got into trouble, and it wouldn’t surprise me to hear that the government forced him to resign ...’

She clearly didn’t like the judge! And, small and wrinkled as she was, it was obvious this little old woman wasn’t afraid to express her opinions about people!

‘Tell me about the body. Is it the judge?’

‘Unfortunately not! That kind of person never gets murdered!’ Excellent! Maigret had his answer, and Méjat laughed into his handkerchief.

‘If you don’t let me tell the story in my own way, you’ll get me all mixed up ... What day is it today? The 13th ... My God, I hadn’t even thought of that ...’

She hastened to touch wood, then to make the sign of the cross.

‘It was the day before yesterday, in other words, the 11th. The previous evening, they’d had people over ...’

‘Who’s “they”?’

‘The Forlacroixs ... Dr Brénéol, with his wife and daughter, I mean his wife’s daughter, because ... It’s a long story ... Anyway, they’d had their little party, as they do every two weeks. They play cards until midnight, then they make a great racket starting their cars ...’

‘You seem to know a lot about what goes on in your neighbours’ house.’

‘I told you, our house – or rather, my late uncle’s house – is more or less behind theirs. So even without meaning to ...’

A gleam had come into the inspector’s eyes that would have pleased Madame Maigret. He was smoking in a particular way, with short puffs, and he went and stoked the stove and then stood there with his back to the fire.

‘About the body ...’

‘The next morning ... I did say it was the 11th, didn’t I? ... The next morning, my husband took advantage of the fact that it was dry to prune the apple trees. I held the ladder. From up there, he could see over the wall. He was level with the first floor of the judge’s house ... One of the windows was open ... Suddenly he comes back down and tells me, just like that:

“Didine ...” My name’s Adine, but everybody calls me Didine ... “Didine,” he says, “there’s someone lying on the floor in the bedroom ...”

“Lying on the floor?” I said, I didn’t believe it. “Why would they be lying on the floor when there are plenty of beds in the house?”

“That’s the way it is ... I’m going back up to have another look ...”

‘He goes back up. He comes down again ... He’s a man who never drinks and who, when he says something ... And he’s a man who thinks. After all, he was a public employee for thirty-five years ...

‘All day, I can see him thinking, thinking. After lunch he goes for his walk. He stops off at the Hôtel du Port ...

“It’s odd!” he says when he comes back. “Nobody came in on the bus yesterday and nobody saw any cars.”

‘It was bothering him, you see? He asks me to hold the ladder for him again. He tells me the man is still lying on the floor ...

‘That evening, he watched the lights until they went off ...’

‘What lights?’

‘The lights in the judge’s house. The thing is, they never close the shutters at the back. They think nobody can see them. Well, the judge came into the room and stayed there for a long time.

‘My husband got dressed again and ran outside ...’

‘Why?’

‘In case the judge got the idea of throwing the body in the water ... But he came back soon after ...

“It’s low tide,” he says. “You’d have to wade through mud up to your neck ...’

‘The next day ...’

Maigret was dumbfounded. He had seen some strange things in the course of his career, but these two elderly people, the retired customs officer and Didine, spying on the judge’s house from their home, keeping the ladder up ...

‘The next day, the body was still there, in the same position.’

She looked at Maigret as if proclaiming: ‘You see, we were right!’

‘My husband watched the house all day. At two o’clock, the judge went for his usual walk with his daughter ...’

‘Ah! The judge has a daughter ...’

‘I’ll tell you about her some other time! A whole other kettle of fish, that one! He also has a son ... But it’s too complicated to ... When your man there behind us has stopped laughing, I may be able to continue ...’

One in the eye for Méjat!

‘Last night, high tide was at 9.26 in the evening ... He still couldn’t do anything, you see? ... Up until midnight, there are always people around. After midnight, there wouldn’t have been enough water any more. So my husband and I decided that, while he kept his eye on them, I’d come and see you. I took the nine o’clock bus. That gentleman told me you might not be coming today, but I realized he was trying to get rid of me. My husband said to me: “Tell the inspector that it’s the customs officer from Concarneau, the one who has a little defect in his eye ... And also tell him that I looked at the body through sailors’ binoculars, and the man isn’t someone from around here ... There’s a stain on the floor that must be blood ...”’

‘Excuse me,’ Maigret interrupted. ‘What time is the bus for L’Aiguillon?’

‘It’s already gone.’

‘How many kilometres, Méjat?’

Méjat had a look on the wall map of the region.

‘About thirty.’

‘Phone for a taxi.’

He didn’t care if Didine and her customs officer were crazy! He was prepared to pay the taxi fare out of his own pocket!

‘If you don’t mind stopping the cab just before the harbour, so that I can get out and they don’t see me with you. It’s better to act as if we don’t know each other. People in L’Aiguillon are so suspicious ... You’ll be able to stay at the Hôtel du Port. It’s the better of the two. That’s where you’ll see just about everybody after dinner. If you can get the room that looks out on the roof of the ballroom, you’ll even be able to see the judge’s house ...’

‘Inform my wife, Méjat.’

Night had fallen, and the world seemed to have turned to water. The old woman appreciated the comfort of the taxi, which had previously been a chauffeur-driven car. The crystal flower holder delighted her, as did the electric ceiling light.

‘I say, the things they make! The rich are so lucky.’

The marshes ... Vast flat expanses, crisscrossed by canals, with the occasional low farmhouse, known as cabins in the Vendée, and the piles of cow pats which, when caked, are used as fuel ...

Something was stirring dimly in Maigret's soul, a kind of hope. He didn't yet dare give in to it. Could it be that right here, deep in the Vendée, where he had been exiled, chance was going to bring him ...

'I almost forgot. This evening, high tide is at 10.51 ...'

Wasn't it staggering to hear this little old lady speaking with such precision?

'If he wants to get rid of the body, he'll take advantage of that. There's a bridge over the Lay that reaches to the harbour. From eleven o'clock, my husband will be on the bridge. If you want to talk to him ...'

She knocked on the glass.

'Drop me here. I'll walk the rest of the way.'

And she plunged into the liquid darkness, her umbrella swelling like a balloon. Soon afterwards, Maigret got out of the taxi outside the Hôtel du Port.

'Want me to wait?'

'No, you might as well go back to Luçon.'

Men in blue, some of them fishermen, others mussel farmers, and bottles of white and rosé wine on long tables of varnished pitch pine. Then a kitchen. Then a ballroom that was only used on Sundays. It all smelled new. White walls. A ceiling of white pine. A staircase as flimsy as a toy and a room that was also white, an iron bedstead covered in gloss paint, cretonne curtains.

'Is that the judge's house I can see?' he asked the maid.

There was light at a dormer window which probably lit the stairs. They tried to persuade him to use the dining room, which was reserved for summer guests, but he preferred the main room. He was served oysters, mussels, shrimp, fish and a leg of lamb, while the men talked among themselves, in a strong accent, about things to do with the sea, especially concerning mussels. Maigret understood none of it.

'Have you had any visitors lately?'

'Not for a week ... Or rather, the day before yesterday ... No, it was the day before that ... Someone got off the bus. He dropped in to tell us he'd be coming for dinner, but we didn't see him again ...'

Maigret kept bumping into things: rails, baskets, steel ropes, crates, oyster shells. The whole seashore was crammed with the sheds where the mussel farmers kept their equipment. A kind of wooden village without inhabitants. A wailing every

two minutes: the foghorn from the Baleines headland on the Ile de Ré, so he had been told, on the other side of the straits.

There were also vague intermittent lights in the sky: the beams from two or three lighthouses disappearing into the mist.

The murmur of water in motion. The waves pushing back the current from the little river, swelling it, and soon – at 10.51, the old woman had said – the tide would be high. In spite of the rain, two lovers stood right up against one of the sheds, lips together, not speaking, not moving.

He looked for the bridge, an interminable wooden bridge, barely wide enough to let a car pass. He made out masts, boats bobbing on the waves. Turning, he could see the lights of the hotel he had just left, then two other lights, a hundred metres further on, those of the judge's house.

'Is that you, inspector?'

He gave a start. He had almost bumped into a man, whose eyes he now saw squinting at him from close quarters.

'Justin Hulot. My wife told me ... I've already been here for an hour, in case he took it into his head to ...'

The rain was cold. Icy air rose from the water of the harbour. Pulleys squeaked, invisible things lived their nocturnal lives.

'Let me bring you up to date. When I went up the ladder at three o'clock, the body was still there. At four o'clock, I decided I'd like to see it once again before nightfall ... Well, it wasn't there any more. *He* must have taken it down. I suppose he's keeping it ready behind the door so as to save time when the moment comes ... I wonder how he's going to carry it. The judge is shorter and thinner than me. About the same height and weight as my wife ... The other man, though ... Shhh! ...'

Someone passed in the darkness. The planks of the bridge shook one after the other. When the danger was over, Hulot resumed:

'On the other side of the bridge is La Faute. Not even a hamlet. Mostly small villas for people who come here in the summer. You'll be able to see it when it's light ... I found out something that may be of interest. On the night of the card game, Albert went to see his father ... Careful! ...'

It was the lovers this time, who had climbed on to the bridge and were now leaning on the parapet and watching the river flow by in the darkness. Maigret's

feet were cold. Water had seeped into his shoes. He noticed that Hulot was wearing rubber boots.

‘It’s a 108 tide. At six in the morning, you’ll see them all going to the mussel fields ...’

He was speaking in a low voice, as if in church. It was at once unnerving and a little grotesque. From time to time, Maigret wondered if he wouldn’t have been better off in Luçon, playing cards at the Café Français with the owner, Dr Jamet, Bourdeuille the ironmonger, and senile old Memimot, who always sat behind them and shook his head at every hand.

‘My wife is watching the back of the house ...’

So the old lady was still involved, was she?

‘You never know. In case he might have got the car out and had the idea of taking the body further away ...’

The body! The body! ... Was there really a body in all this?

Three pipes ... Four pipes ... From time to time the door of the hotel opened and closed, and footsteps could be heard moving away, voices. Then the lights went out. A rowing boat passed beneath the bridge.

‘That’s old Bariteau on his way to laying his eel nets. He won’t be back for another two hours.’

How could old Bariteau see his way in all this blackness? God knows. You sensed the presence of the sea, very close, just at the end of the narrows. You could breathe it in. It was swelling, irresistibly invading the straits.

Maigret mind wandered, he couldn’t have said why. He thought of the recent merger of the Police Judiciaire and the Sûreté Générale and of certain points of friction that ... Luçon! He had been sent to Luçon, where ...

‘Look ...’

Hulot gripped his arm nervously.

No, it really was unbelievable! The idea that these two old people ... That ladder held by Didine ... The naval binoculars ... And those calculations of tides! ...

‘The lights have been switched off.’

What was so extraordinary, at this hour, about seeing all the lights go out in the judge’s house?

‘Come. We can’t see well enough ...’

All the same, Maigret found himself walking on tiptoe in order not to shake the planks of the bridge. That siren lowing like a hoarse cow ...

The water had almost reached the wooden sheds. A foot struck a broken basket.

‘Shhh!’

And then they saw the door of the judge’s house open.

A short, sprightly man appeared in the doorway, looked left and right and went back into the passage. A moment later, the improbable happened. The little man reappeared, bent over, gripping a long object that he started dragging through the mud.

It must have been heavy. After four metres, he stopped to catch his breath. The front door of the house had been left open. The sea was still twenty or thirty metres away.

‘Oof ...’

They sensed that ‘oof’, sensed the physical effort he must be making. The rain was still falling. Hulot’s hand trembled convulsively on Maigret’s thick sleeve.

‘You see!’

Oh, yes! It had happened just as the old woman had said, just as the former customs officer had predicted. That little man was clearly Judge Forlacroix. And what he was dragging in the mud was definitely the lifeless body of a man!



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